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MONCRIEFFE'S SECOND WIFE.

A NOVEL.

BY

LOLO,

AUTHOR OF "WOOING A SWEETBRIAR," "A CRUEL SECRET," "WAS HERS THE FAULT?" ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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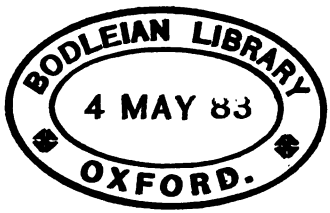

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MONCRIEFFE'S SECOND WIFE.

CHAPTER I.

ON THE BRINK.

"AND so I am to lose you to-morrow, my child."

The words were uttered half lovingly, half wistfully, as Mrs de Vere smoothed the golden locks from her daughter's fair brow. To-morrow morning Constance was to be married, and the mother and daughter were busy packing the last of the latter's boxes, in preparation for the morrow's departure.

"Not for long, mother darling," replied Constance softly, raising her deep violet eyes, fringed by their long brown lashes, fondly to her mother's anxious face. "You know Bruce said to-day he hoped he would see a great deal of you at Moncrieffe Castle."

"Well, as long as you are happy, dear, that is all I care for," said Mrs de Vere evasively, and smiling as brightly as she could upon her daughter.

Her heart misgave her sorely as she thought of the new life upon which the girl was about to enter; but she was careful not to let Constance perceive this, and, indeed, knew that most people would have laughed at her as fanciful and absurd. For the De Veres were very poor, and everyone considered that Constance was very lucky to make such a good match.

Her father, Captain de Vere, had been in the navy, and had died six years ago, when she (Constance) was only seventeen, leaving his wife and five children very ill provided for.

Upon his death, Mrs de Vere had come to Clinchester, which was a cheap place to live in, and where there was cheap and good education to be had for her children.

Constance, who was considerably older than any of the others, had been obliged to take a situation as companion with an old lady in the neighbourhood of Clinchester.

Mrs de Vere had greatly disliked the idea of sending the girl out into the world to battle for herself, before her character was properly formed; but fortunately Mrs Graham, the lady to whom she went, was kind and indulgent to her, and there had been nothing in

Constance's daily duties to gall or sour her temper, which was naturally sweet and even. Her great object had been to help her mother, and if she sometimes found her life with old Mrs Graham dull, and sighed inwardly for some of the pleasures and amusements common to her age, she stifled the inward longings bravely, and tried her best to be quietly contented with her lot. She was a sensible girl naturally, and her education had made her still more so, and Mrs Graham, who had at first hesitated about engaging so young a girl as her companion, had every reason to be pleased and satisfied with her.

As has been already said, she was a kind old lady, and wished Constance to have as many pleasures as were compatible with the performance of her duties as companion. She quite understood that the dull dinners, and quiet tea drinkings, in which she found pleasure, could afford but little amusement to a young girl, and so every Christmas she sent Constance home for a week or ten days, during which time her mother was able to take her to several balls and dances; for the De Veres had many kind friends in Clinchester, who gladly asked them to their parties, though they could give no entertainment in return. At first Mrs de Vere suggested that this little bit of gaiety might unsettle Constance, and make her long for more; but Mrs Graham, who had known Mrs de Vere intimately before her

marriage, pooh-poohed her friend's objections, saying that it would be a shame to keep a pretty girl like Constance locked up with an old woman; and that her maid, Benson, who had lived with her for twenty years, was quite competent to take care of her during her companion's brief absence. Every summer too, Mrs Graham went to spend six weeks with her sister, Mrs Fortescue, at Brighton; and as she could not take Constance with her, the girl had a holiday during her absence, and was able to accompany her family to Malvern, where they always came for the mid-summer holidays.

Mrs de Vere's only sister was married to a well-to-do clergyman here, named Aubrey, and had a large family, some of the girls being about Constance's age. As the cousins were great friends, these holidays were a great treat to them all; especially to Constance, to whom pleasure of any sort was naturally a greater treat than to the others. Her life was not utterly barren of pleasure therefore, and on the whole she was happy during the first four years of her stay with Mrs Graham. But then the old lady had begun to droop and fail; little by little she dropped visiting her friends, and with the exception of several older members of the surrounding county families, with whom she had long been intimate, few people took the trouble of coming to see her. She required

more attendance than formerly, and Constance had to miss her mid-summer and Christmas holidays. The girl had certainly found the last two years trying and wearisome; the Aubreys wrote her that they were having unusually gay summers; and then came the news that Kitty Aubrey, her special friend, was about to marry, and go out to China. Soon afterwards, Edith Aubrey, her only other grown-up cousin, married too, and went to Canada, and Constance felt that while she was being locked up in this quiet country house, her little circle of friends was gradually melting away, leaving her alone and desolate. Her pretty little sister Pearl, would be sure to marry soon; her brothers would go out to the Colonies; and she would be left lamenting. But through all this she tried conscientiously to be kind and attentive to her kind old mistress. And at last Mrs Graham died, leaving all her money to the children of her sister, Mrs Fortescue's, eldest daughter, the late Mrs Moncrieffe.

Mr Moncrieffe, their father, who was appointed executor, came down to arrange Mrs Graham's affairs, and it was discovered that he and the late Captain de Vere had formerly been great friends. Captain de Vere's elder brother, Sir Charles de Vere, who was a wealthy English baronet, had lately come into a property in Scotland, close to Mr Moncrieffe's place, and the latter regarded Miss de Vere not so much in the

light of a poor companion, as the niece of his wealthy neighbour, and the daughter of his old friend. Mrs Graham had left Constance a small legacy, and Mr Moncrieffe came to the De Veres' house first on business. It was just a pleasant walk from Mrs Graham's house into Clinchester, and after his first visit, Mr Moncrieffe used often to walk in and call on Mrs de Vere.

He was a handsome, dark man of nine-and-thirty at this time. He had married, at the ridiculously early age of twenty-one, a girl of seventeen, who had died two years after their marriage, leaving him two little daughters. After her death he had remained with his regiment for several years, after which he had retired from the service, and spent his time at Moncrieffe Castle for the shooting, and during the rest of the year, in aimless rovings about the world at large. His two little girls were brought up by their grandmother, Mrs Fortescue, at Brighton; and of late years he had begun to think that he ought to marry again, and remove them from her care. It was not that she was bringing them up badly, so much as foolishly. She had taken every pains with their education, and while they were children, she had not spoilt them to any great degree; but she had been fast in her own youth, and her daughters were all fast, and Moncrieffe had not liked the idea of his girls being brought out into society under her wing. Besides, unless he married,

and had a son, the family of Moncrieffe would become extinct; and he felt that it was his positive duty to prevent this. Still, he had never hitherto been able to induce himself to marry; he had been devoted to his first wife, Julia, and though the pain which her loss had caused him had somewhat abated with years, yet he could not divest himself of the idea that, if he took another wife, he would be laying a slight on the memory of his lost angel. Sooth to say, his lost angel had been a very silly, frivolous young person during her lifetime, and had she lived, her husband must slowly but surely have discovered her shallowness. But he had been too young, and too much in love at the time of his marriage, to wish her to possess anything beyond her beauty; and during their brief married life, he had hardly had time to discover her deficiencies of mind and character. For many years after her death he had continued inconsolable, though now his pain had well-nigh worn itself out. He still continued to think tenderly of his pretty little Julia; but he gazed on her portrait less often than of yore, and when he did so, he saw, as he had never seen in his boyish days, that the pretty doll's face looked shallow and soulless; and that the smile which he had been wont to think so angelically sweet, bore a close resemblance to an affected simper. Not that he ever made use of these terms even to himself. He would have thought it sacri-

lege to think slightingly of his dead wife. But deep down in his heart lay the conviction that he and Julia would not have been happy together in the long run. He would have chafed at her silliness as he grew older, and might have grown impatient with her childish pets and caprices. Had she lived, she would now have been thirty-five, and would have been fast developing into a little fat dumpling of a woman, like her mother, whom she closely resembled. Altogether, Bruce Moncrieffe saw that it was perhaps best his wife had died while she was young and happy, and he yet regarded her as an angel; but still the fact remained, that he had loved her dearly in his young days, and he did not feel, somehow, as if he could ever care for anyone again in the same way.

He had travelled widely, and seen plenty of pretty women, and lots of pleasant women; but the older he grew, the more fastidious his taste seemed to become. He liked ladies' society, but the ladies he met knocking about in the society of the different countries he visited, were not of the sort from whom he would have chosen a wife. He did not want a fashionable worldling, yet he wished his wife to be a lady well versed in the ways of the world, else how could she chaperon his young daughters? His eldest girl, Harriet, was nearly seventeen now, and he felt that he really must marry, and take her away

from the Fortescues, who had already allowed her to make her *début* in society, greatly to the annoyance of Moncrieffe, who considered eighteen the proper age for girls to come out.

He was in this frame of mind when he came down to settle Mrs Graham's affairs, and met the De Veres. He was at once struck by Constance de Vere's beauty, and the more he saw of her, the more he became convinced that she was just the sort of girl to make him a good wife. Her beauty pleased his fastidious taste, while her sweet manners attracted and charmed him. She seemed gentle and sweet-tempered, yet sensible and firm at the same time; and though she had been a paid companion, the fact of her being Sir Charles de Vere's niece would ensure her a warm reception in ———shire, though in any case, the wife of Moncrieffe of Moncrieffe must always be a lady of considerable importance in the land. Then, too, Moncrieffe liked Mrs de Vere immensely, and he had grown old enough to know that a disagreeable mother-in-law was a serious disadvantage.

He understood now that his friends had been right when they declared so indignantly that Mrs Fortescue had trapped him into a marriage with her daughter Julia. It had been ridiculous in the face of it, to let a boy and girl of twenty-one and seventeen marry; but Mrs Fortescue had thought young Moncrieffe too good a chance to let slip, through

any absurd scruples. General Fortescue (Major he was then) was her second husband, and no one knew exactly who Mr Bland, Julia's father, had been, though it was vaguely reported that he had been in "business" of some sort. But both Bruce's parents were dead, and no one had a right to oppose his marriage, though certainly it was a great *mésalliance* for him. Mrs de Vere's conduct contrasted favourably with Mrs Bland's in this respect. She always welcomed Mr Moncrieffe kindly to her house, but she never pressed him to come, or tried to throw him and Constance much together.

For four weeks Moncrieffe continued to watch Constance attentively. No doubt he might have finished his business in Clinchester soon, had he tried; but he lingered over it for four weeks, at the end of which he asked Constance to be his wife, and was accepted by her. He had insisted on the engagement being a very short one, and so the marriage had been fixed for six weeks after his proposal and acceptance. Part of this time he had spent in London and Scotland, arranging his business affairs; so really he and Constance knew very little of each other, now that their wedding day had almost arrived. He liked, esteemed, and greatly admired her, but he could hardly be said to be deeply attached to her; and it was the consciousness of this that embittered Mrs de Vere's satisfaction at her daughter's splendid marriage.

Constance was only twenty-three, and she was about to marry a man of nine-and-thirty, and undertake the charge of two grown-up step-daughters, who would naturally regard her advent with great disfavour. She would find herself suddenly transformed from a simple companion to one of the leading ladies in her county, and would need all the tact and *savoir faire* of a woman of the world to sustain her position. If only she had been supported by her husband's love, Mrs de Vere would not have trembled for her; but something told the mother that Moncrieffe was marrying the girl principally as a head to his establishment, and a useful chaperon to his daughters. And if this were indeed the case, he would probably be impatient of any little mistakes or blunders which Constance might make at first from girlish thoughtlessness, or ignorance. Still, what could Mrs de Vere do? Constance cared for him, and did not seem to perceive anything amiss in him; and the mother did not like to dash the girl's happiness by hinting her doubts to her. Besides, it was such a splendid marriage, and it was not likely Constance would ever have such another chance again. She had had several offers already. The handsome young curate at the church which she attended with Mrs Graham, had thrown up his curacy in despair when she refused him. An impecunious young officer, whom she had met at a ball in Clinchester, and a fat, elderly bachelor

navy captain, whom she had met at Malvern, had respectively laid their hearts at her feet; but Moncrieffe was the first who had touched hers, and the only one of her admirers whom her mother could have wished her to marry. So Mrs de Vere kept her doubts locked within her own breast, and tried to console herself with the reflection that Bruce Moncrieffe was a good and honourable man, if a somewhat cold one. And, certainly, Constance seemed happy enough.

Mrs de Vere gazed at her with fond, admiring eyes, as she knelt beside her trunk, laying in a few last articles, and told herself that no man could live with her long without learning to love her. And, certainly, if beauty could win her husband's love, Constance had little to fear. For she was, undoubtedly, a very lovely girl, though, perhaps, no task is so hard as that of trying to describe a pretty face. Constance's greatest beauty lay in her eyes, most people said. At a little distance, they appeared large and dark, but a nearer view showed that they were a wonderful deep violet, with large, black pupils, and fringed by brown lashes, which made up in length what they lacked in blackness. Of her pretty features we will say nothing; but her figure was tall and graceful, and her small, well-poised head was crowned by thick coils of bright golden hair, with a shading of brown about her temples.

"That is Bruce's knock," said the girl, as a loud rat-tat sounded through the little house. "Well, I can't go down till I've finished this box. Pearl is in the schoolroom, so she can amuse him."

In a few more minutes the box was closed and locked, and Constance, leaving her mother to write the address on it, flew lightly downstairs to the schoolroom, where she heard her lover and sister talking. A pretty child of seventeen, with a little pale face, large dreamy blue eyes, and soft dark brown hair, was seated in the window, painting a satin fan, and looked up smilingly as her sister entered, to inquire why she had been so long in coming down, when she knew Bruce was here.

"I had to finish packing a box," replied Constance apologetically, glancing at her lover, who, however, seemed in nowise impatient at her delay in appearing.

He was a tall, fine-looking man, with a grave, rather severe, face, but a kind look in his dark eyes.

"Pearl has been doing her best to pacify my impatience," he said, smiling at his sister-in-law elect.

He had risen on Constance's entrance, and touched her forehead gravely with his lips; but the action was so quiet and undemonstrative, that it seemed as if he had merely shaken hands with her. Constance was never hurt by this quiet manner of his, which she sup-

posed was only "his way;" indeed, being a quiet, gentle girl herself, she might have been rather discomposed by very violent love-making on the part of her *fiancé*. But Pearl gazed at Moncrieffe, with a puzzled look in her dreamy eyes. She could not make him out at all. He seemed very nice and kind, and that sort of thing; but Pearl was sure she should be terribly afraid of him if she were in Constance's place, and she wondered inwardly whether he and her sister really cared for one another much. Certainly they were very unlike what she had supposed betrothed lovers to be.

After a few minutes, Pearl rose and left the lovers alone together, though Moncrieffe called out laughingly to her not to go, as he and Constance had no secrets to discuss.

"What a sweet little thing your sister is," he said, as the door closed on the young girl's retreating figure.

"Most people think so," smiled Constance quietly.

"We must have her up to stay with us at Moncrieffe next summer; and, perhaps, when she is a little older you might give her a season in London—her face ought to make her fortune there."

"How good you are, Bruce," said Constance, a grateful glow deepening her beautiful eyes.

But her lover took no notice of either her words or look, and continued absently:

"She will be a charming companion for

Harry and Julia. She is just the sort of girl I have always wished them to have as a friend. I don't very much care for some of their friends in Brighton."

To this Constance made no reply, for she saw that Bruce was sunk in thought—probably concerning his girls. Somehow their names were always cropping up in his conversation; and if at times Constance was tempted to think him cold, she remembered how deeply attached he was to his children, and reflected that he must have a warm heart somewhere, and that it was really not his fault, poor fellow, if his manner was naturally reserved and undemonstrative. For several minutes the silence lasted; but presently it was broken by the discordant screaming of a parrot which hung in the window.

"I should like to wring that brute's neck!" exclaimed Moncrieffe irritably, as he came out of his reverie, with a jerk. "I wonder your mother could allow it to be brought into the house."

"It would have broken the boys' hearts if she had refused to admit it," laughed Constance.

"You're a fool—you're a fool," screeched the bird.

"That's about the only thing it can say," observed Constance, "and it comes out with it on all occasions."

Here a loud clattering of feet and voices

was heard in the hall, and the next minute the schoolroom door was burst roughly open, and three fair-haired, nice-looking lads, of the respective ages of sixteen, fourteen, and thirteen, came trooping in, flinging their books on the table, and shaking hands curtly with Mr Moncrieffe. The latter rose abruptly and made his adieux. He liked the ladies of the family extremely; but the boys were quite too much for him. Tea was being laid in the dining-room opposite, and Mrs de Vere invited him to stay and partake of it; but he declined, with inward disgust, and parted from his *fiancée* with only a quiet pressure of the hand. The next time they met, it would be in the church where they were to be married; but at the minute Moncrieffe quite forgot this fact, and parted from Constance just a little carelessly. She felt rather hurt, for the first time since their engagement, for it was evident to her that he had quite forgotten that this was the eve of their marriage, and she turned back rather slowly towards the schoolroom, where her brothers were whispering loudly together.

"I watched them through the window for some minutes," said Fred, the second boy's voice, "and there they were both sitting quite mum, and not looking at each other, even. Then that noisy fowl set up a row at sight of me, and I had to retire."

"He's a brute!" responded Frank, the eldest boy. "He can't bear the sight of *us*, I can

see; and I don't believe he cares a rap for Constance either."

Constance's hand was on the handle of the schoolroom door, which was already slightly ajar; but she turned hastily away, as if her brother's careless words had stabbed her, and fled up to her own room, where she locked herself in. Not love her! What could have put such an absurd idea into the boys' heads? And yet it was only like an echo of an unacknowledged feeling in her own heart. Somehow she always felt a dissatisfied want when she was with her lover; yet he was always kind and attentive to her; and if he had not loved her, what possible object *could* he have had in marrying her? This argument was conclusive to Constance, and she went downstairs to tea feeling more satisfied, but very angry with her brothers for their hasty judgment of her betrothed.

CHAPTER II.

THE FIRST PLUNGE.

IT was over. Constance had driven quietly to church in a pretty grey travelling costume, and now she and her husband were on their road to the station, to catch the mid-day train for London. There had been no breakfast or fuss of any sort; for the De Veres were too poor to make much show; and then, too, Mrs Graham had only been dead ten weeks; and though she was not related to Bruce Moncrieffe personally, yet she had been his first wife's aunt, and had just left two thousand a-year to each of his daughters. So, on all accounts, it seemed well that the wedding should be a quiet one; and the only guests were Mr and Mrs Aubrey, with their youngest daughter, Grace, the former of whom gave away the bride, while Grace and Pearl were the two bridesmaids. There had been only time for a round of hasty farewells in the

church, and a clinging, convulsive embrace to her mother, and then Constance found herself seated by her husband's side in the carriage that was to convey them to the station.

Was she supremely happy, or intensely miserable? She hardly knew; she was only conscious that her fate, whatever it was, had caught her in a relentless grasp, and was hurrying her on with a rapidity that deprived her (figuratively speaking) of breath, and half frightened her. She felt her husband kiss her kindly, and beg her not to break down; and then she shook herself together, with an effort, and replied, with a little tremulous laugh, that she did not intend to make a goose of herself.

Mr Moncrieffe was considerably relieved to hear this, for he had a horror of "scenes;" and Constance's drooping eyelids, and pale, quivering lips, had looked suspiciously like tears. He could not in the least understand why a girl should cry when she was married; to him it seemed mere affectation, and he was glad to see that Constance had too much sense to indulge in such nonsense.

The drive to the station was short, and on reaching it they found they were late, and had to hurry as much as they could to avoid missing the train. Finally they were bustled into a carriage with an elderly couple, who were also bound for London; so very little conversation could pass between them on the journey, and Bruce spent the time in studying

the *Field*, while Constance leant back in her seat, and stared dreamily out of the window beside her, only turning her head now and then to take a furtive glance at her husband opposite her, or to reply to some remark of his.

It was late in the evening when they reached London, and drove to the hotel where they were to remain during their week in town. At the end of this week they were going to spend another week with the Fortescues at Brighton, after which Moncrieffe intended to take his wife and daughters abroad for the winter. It would have seemed more natural, perhaps, for the bride and bridegroom to have gone on their wedding tour alone; but Moncrieffe was anxious to get his daughters away from Brighton with as little delay as possible, and also thought it would be an advantage for them to see something of the Continent. If he did not take them now, he would probably have to do so again; and as he had grown tolerably tired of roving about, he thought he might as well kill two birds with one stone, and combine his honeymoon with an instructive tour for his girls.

It was now the end of November, and London was supposed to be quite empty; but during their week in town one or two stray friends called on the Moncrieffes, and among others the Honourable Mrs Greville, sister to Constance's father, and who had married the second son of the Earl of Grimby. Mrs

Greville had almost forgotten the existence of her youngest brother's widow and family during the last six years, but now her affection for them seemed suddenly to have revived, and she asked Constance after each member of her family with much apparent interest—only, unfortunately, she could not quite remember all the boys' names, nor their exact ages. She was very affectionate to Constance, however; insisted on her and Mr Moncrieffe's coming to dine with her in her neat little house in Mayfair, and allowed them to take her to a box at the theatre, the play having been chosen by herself.

Mrs Greville was a pretty little widow of eight-and-thirty now. Her father had married twice, and she was his only child by his second marriage, and considerably younger than either Sir Charles or Captain de Vere. She was not very well off, though she continued to make a good deal of show on what money she had. Her little dinners were elegant in the extreme; but the viands were seldom of the best quality, and the wine was atrocious. Had she been called upon to repeat the articles of her belief, she would have replied glibly, in a plaintive, sing-song tone, that she was a poor little unprotected woman, and that little unprotected women have a special claim on their neighbours' generosity. Hence she was apt to anticipate her neighbours' generosity on every possible occasion. Was she going to a flower-

show, she let them pay her entrance fee, as simply and frankly as if she had been a school-girl, out for a treat: did anyone rashly lend her a shilling or a sovereign, they never got it back; and she made a point of never returning any book she borrowed. In fact, she was one of those lady-like vagrants whom we occasionally meet in society, and who go about seeking what (of their neighbours' goods) they may devour.

She was deeply chagrined now, that she had taken so little notice of Mrs de Vere and her children. If she had had any idea that Constance was going to have turned out a beauty, she would certainly have had her up to stay with her in her doll's house in Mayfair sometimes, and then the girl would have been more likely to invite her down to Moncrieffe Castle, now that she was married. Her regret on this point was so sincere, that she inquired anxiously of Constance whether her sister resembled her in beauty.

"Oh, no; Pearl and I are not in the least alike," replied Constance carelessly. "She is very pretty, but she is not like me."

"But she is a beauty too! No, my dear, don't protest" (Constance was not protesting, being above that sort of affectation); "I assure you yours is the very loveliest face I ever saw. And so your sister is pretty, too! How I long to see her! Do you think your mother would let her come to me next spring?"

"Thank you," replied Constance carelessly,

"but my sister is too young to come out yet. When she is, I hope to have her with me."

Mrs Greville sighed so piteously at this, that her niece felt inclined to laugh.

"It was too bad of me to marry a rich man, and throw poor Aunt Fanny so completely out of her reckonings," said Constance laughingly to her husband, when relating this conversation to him afterwards.

"She seems a nice person, my dear. We must ask her down to Moncrieffe next autumn, don't you think?"

"Oh, certainly, as far as I am concerned," replied Constance good-naturedly.

The week in town passed away quickly, and very happily, on the whole, for the bride. Her husband devoted himself religiously to her amusement, and denied himself various pastimes (such as lounging about his club, etc.) in order to escort her to the various places she wished to visit. He took her to all the best plays, though he hated the theatre himself; and also to several concerts, which was not such a penance to him, since he happened to be fond of music. It occurred to him that Constance's *trousseau* must necessarily have been extremely simple; so the day after their arrival in town, he placed bank-notes to the amount of one hundred pounds in her hands, and told her to spend them as she pleased; adding, that he would give her a similar sum every quarter. He was also prepared to

follow her about to any number of shops; but Constance shrank from letting it appear that she was in a hurry to spend his money, and confined herself to a few purchases, which she made one day, when she happened to be out alone with Mrs Greville. This fact, simple though it may appear at first sight, was significant of the want of mutual confidence and understanding which existed between the husband and wife. No saying is so true as that perfect love casteth out fear, and it is a bad sign when a husband and wife begin by feeling constrained in each other's presence. If Constance had only understood it, the best thing she could have done would have been to take her husband into her confidence about her little interests, such as shopping, etc., even at the risk of bothering him slightly. It would have taught him to think of, and feel for her; and her little demands upon his interest would have been like soft trails of ivy, creeping over the cold wall of unsympathy (if I may make use of such a word), which stood between them. Human nature is apt to love anything upon which it has bestowed care and kindness; just as it is prone to show ingratitude towards those from whom it has received benefits. It is assuredly true, in more senses than one, that it is more blessed to give than to receive; and Moncrieffe, whose proud spirit would have rebelled against the idea of marrying a woman with money, was filled with a

sort of tender, protecting feeling, towards the girl whom he had raised from poverty.

On her side, she felt as if she had loved him from the very first minute when her eyes had rested on his kind, handsome face; but yet she was afraid of him. He was so grave and silent, and it was so difficult to find anything to talk to him about. She knew nothing of his family or friends, and he knew but little of hers; and he was not one to talk upon indifferent subjects merely for the sake of talking, so perhaps it was natural that conversation should sometimes flag between them. For instance, one wet afternoon, when the thick yellow fog hid the houses on the opposite side of the street, and made it impossible for Constance to venture out of doors, she felt the task of entertaining her husband particularly heavy and disheartening. He did not like to leave her alone yet, though he thought he might allow himself to spend an hour at his club before dinner since Constance did not require him to escort her anywhere. But at present it was only half-past two, and Moncrieffe was doing his best to stifle his yawns behind the paper which he held in his hand. He was seated in the window, trying to make the most of the yellow light; and Constance sat by the fire, trifling with a piece of fancy work. She had tried several subjects of conversation already, but without much success.

When she made some remark about the book she was reading, he replied "Really?" in a tone of profound indifference; and when she inquired whether there was any news in the paper, he replied "None," in a tone of weary resignation. Then she began in desperation to tell him that she had bought a beautiful muff the previous afternoon, during her shopping expedition with Mrs Greville. It was rather a silly subject she was aware; but if we only opened our lips when we had something sensible to say, our remarks would be few and far between. People *must* talk, reflected Constance, and on a wet afternoon one is generally only too thankful to anyone who originates a remark—even if it be only on the disagreeableness of the weather.

"Indeed!" said Moncrieffe, in a way that made his wife painfully aware of the triviality of her last remark. Then, as if conscious that he was not doing his share of the talking, he added, in a tone of forced interest, that she would find plenty of things to spend her money on abroad. "Though I always think you get things best in England, you know," he concluded, and his last words were half lost in a yawn.

"One always has an idea that things that come from abroad must be better than anything one can get here," said Constance lightly.

"Has one?" responded Moncrieffe absently,

and for a minute or two silence reigned between them, while Constance reflected despairingly that he did not care to hear her talk, and found it a bore having to answer her.

Surely if two people love each other, they ought to take pleasure in hearing each other speak. But *did* her husband love her? That was the bitter doubt that would keep suggesting itself to Constance; though her common sense told her that he would never have married her unless he had loved her.

"You had a letter from your mother just now, had you not?" asked Moncrieffe presently. "I hope she and your sister are quite well?"

"Yes, thanks. They are rather dull now the Aubreys have left them. Frank has got into rather a mess at the college;" and then she proceeded to relate a tale of school-boy mischief, to which Moncrieffe listened politely, but with so little show of interest, that Constance's voice grew unconsciously weary and dull, and she brought her story to a hasty and rather lame conclusion.

Her husband made no comment upon it, and she sat silent, trying to force down the tears that were so suspiciously near her eyes. Had she told the little history of her brother's escapade lightly and pleasantly, without heeding how her husband was looking, he would have been amused, and might probably have ended by laughing heartily over it; but Constance, who had never been shy

in her life before, now found herself oppressed with shyness while with her husband. She was too intensely sympathetic to be able to laugh and talk lightly to a companion who was looking grave and reserved, and when her husband allowed her remarks to pass unnoticed, she felt hurt and snubbed.

When the clock struck four, Moncrieffe rose to prepare for going to his club. He kissed Constance before he left her, and said he hoped she would not be dull while he was away; adding that he would not be long absent.

"Oh, don't hurry home for me," said Constance, who felt that Bruce's absence would be rather a relief, "I have letters to write, and shall not be dull at all."

But instead of writing when he was gone, she sat down and had a little quiet cry. It was so dreadful to see Bruce looking dull and bored, and not be able to amuse him; even if he had been in love with her to begin with, he would soon weary of her if he found her so stupid and uninteresting. No one had ever seemed to think her stupid before; but she had never met anyone whom it was so difficult to get on with as her husband. He had very little to say for himself, and he always made her feel that her own remarks were terribly trivial and silly.

Now, my reader, do not run away with the impression that Bruce Moncrieffe was a monster of surliness and unsociability, for indeed

he was nothing of the sort. He was merely a good, kind-hearted man, with an unfortunately grave, reserved manner. His early manhood had been spoilt by the death of his first wife, and since then everyone said he had changed sadly. He would have been deeply pained could he have guessed how his gravity was affecting Constance, but it never occurred to him that she could possibly think him unkind, or imagine that he found her society wearisome.

It was true that he had found the hours hang very heavily to-day; but that was only natural, since he could neither take Constance out, nor leave her alone. It was also true that he had not found her society particularly entertaining, for he was not in love with her, and consequently did not take the same delight in all her trivial remarks that he might otherwise have done. He thought her a sweet, good girl; but a gentle, amiable companion is not always the most amusing one, especially on a wet day. Still he would not have hurt her feelings by letting her perceive this, for the world.

But men are much more open in showing their true feelings than women; and Moncrieffe's tact was certainly none of the best. To a sympathetic nature like Constance's, the very suspicion that he found her dull company was sufficient to weight all her efforts at liveliness, and make her as stupid as she fancied he felt her.

She cried with a sort of hopeless, chill feeling in her heart after he had left her; but paused at last, fearing, if she wept longer, that her husband would notice the traces of her grief on his return.

This was the last day of their stay in town, and hitherto the weather had been tolerably fine, and things had gone happily enough with the bride. But to-day the dull suspicion that had been gradually shaping itself in her mind duringt he last week, seemed to develop into a certainty, and she told herself bitterly that Bruce found her a drag on himself, and that it bored him to have to dance such constant attendance upon her as he had lately been doing. Thank goodness, their *tête-à-tête* life would be over to-morrow!

But when Moncrieffe returned to dinner, Constance did her best to receive him pleasantly; for she understood that he had never meant to be cold to her, and had the sense to see that it would only make bad worse if she let him perceive her depression. Moncrieffe happened to be particularly talkative to-night, having brought back some news from his club, and being in better spirits than usual. He noticed that his wife was looking unusually pale, and fearing she had been moped by her long day in-doors, he exerted himself to amuse her, and was so kind that Constance began to reproach herself for being discontented and ungrateful. She recalled how anxious he had

appeared to make her happy during the last week, and how thoughtful he had always been for her comfort; and yet, though she strove hard to shut her eyes to the fact, there was a want of spontaneousness in all his actions that gave them rather the appearance of sacrifices to duty, than freewill offerings to love. Yet, perhaps, it was only his manner that was to blame, and when she got accustomed to it, she would cease to feel so oppressed by it.

CHAPTER III.

THE AWAKENING.

THAT evening the Moncrieffes spent at the theatre, so there was no further opportunity for Bruce to evince *ennui*, and the following day they set out for Brighton. This time they had a railway carriage to themselves, and could have talked as much as they liked, had they felt inclined; but during the greater part of the journey they remained silent; Moncrieffe absorbed in his paper, and Constance speculating upon the reception she would meet with from her step-daughters. Neither of them had written her a word either before or since her marriage; but in London, Bruce had received an affectionate letter from Julia, the youngest girl, at the end of which she had asked him to give her love to her new mamma. There had been no message from Harriet, however, and Constance saw that her husband was annoyed by his elder girl's silence.

"Do you think the girls will be sorry to leave their grandmother, Bruce?" she asked at last.

"I don't know," replied Moncrieffe, laying down his paper, and evidently preparing himself to talk. "You must have patience with them, Constance," he added, apologetically, "if they do not receive you very warmly at first. You see Harry will be seventeen next month; and she expected to take her place as mistress of Moncrieffe Castle next summer, so perhaps she may be rather jealous of you at first. I tell you this, dear, so that you may understand her feelings, and make allowance for her, if you do not think her everything she ought to be. She is just like a child deprived of a toy she has coveted, you see; but she is a fine girl really, and you will soon become friends, I am sure. As for Julia, everyone gets on with her. She is rather a spoilt baby, perhaps, but she is a dear little thing."

This was the first time that her husband had ever spoken openly to Constance about his children. It was not that he wished to conceal anything from her, but simply that he was naturally reserved, and unaccustomed to discuss his family affairs with anyone. Consequently Constance only knew that Harriet was tall, dark, and handsome, like her father; and that little Julia was fair, like her dead mother. This much she had gathered from Moncrieffe, and

had also surmised from his manner of speaking of the girls, that Julia was his special favourite. But what he told her now filled her with a sudden alarm, and Moncrieffe, seeing the anxious look on her face, hastened to add encouragingly,—

"Don't worry yourself about what I have said, dear. Harry is a good-hearted girl, and easily managed if you go the right way to work."

"It must be provoking for grown-up girls when their father marries again," said Constance gravely.

"It is the very best thing that could possibly have happened to Harry and Julia, though they may not see it themselves at first," replied Moncrieffe emphatically. Then, seeing that his wife looked puzzled, he added: "The fact is, I don't like to leave them with the Fortescues any longer. Mrs Fortescue is a kind, well-meaning woman, but a very foolish one; and I don't consider her daughters good companions for my girls. They are fast, you know; always having a lot of officers hanging about the house, and that style of thing. They are good-natured girls, and don't mean any harm I daresay; but bad style you know. They allowed Harry to come out when she was only sixteen and a-half, without telling me; and if she stays with them she will be spoilt. She is not old enough to live at Moncrieffe Castle by herself yet, though I daresay she considers that she is. You may find a good

many faults to correct in her; but you are sensible, dear, and will understand how to influence her, I am sure. Do you think I am asking you to take too much trouble about my children, dear?"

"Oh, no; I will do my best," answered Constance, faintly; and then she sat silent, gazing out at the flying landscape, and pondering confusedly on what Bruce had said.

So *this* was why he had married her! He wanted a step-mother for his girls, and had chosen her because she seemed sensible! If this was all he wanted, why had he not married some ugly old woman, instead of spoiling her fresh young life by placing her as a kind of finishing governess over two girls whose characters were already formed, and who would probably hate her if she attempted to interfere with them in any way? Hot, bitter words rose to Constance's lips, but by a supreme effort she restrained them. Sore and hurt though she was at the discovery she had just made, she had sufficient sense to see that since she was married beyond all hope of escape, she must make the best of the situation. It could do no possible good to reproach her husband now for his selfishness in marrying her; and after all, had he not paid a high price for her? She had been a poor companion; and he was a man of wealth and position—what possible right had she to accuse him of selfishness, or to find fault with her lot? The bitter spirit

in her whispered that probably he had chosen her partly on account of her poverty; feeling that, if she ever discovered his want of affection for her, she would have less room to reproach him than if she had been his equal in wealth and position. But by-and-by her passion died out, and the voice of reason began to make itself heard in her heart. If her husband were not absolutely in love with her now, that was no reason why she should not teach him to love her in the end. A wife must always win in the long run, if she plays her cards properly. If she did her duty by Bruce's children, and he saw that she made them happy, he would probably come to care for her for her own sake. And why should she take it for granted that he did not care for her now? He had chosen her in preference to all the other women he knew, and probably he did care for her a little —but here the tears rushed blindingly into Constance's eyes, for it is very bitter for a young wife to feel that her husband is only "rather fond" of her. It was of no use trying to reason with herself just then; her heart cried out loudly that she had been ill-used and deceived, and the rebellious tears would fight their way into her eyes. But fortunately Moncrieffe's face was behind his paper, and he did not see his wife's emotion. She soon conquered it however—outwardly at any rate, and when they reached Brighton she appeared as calm as usual, if a trifle paler.

The Fortescues' house stood on the outskirts of the town, and was surrounded by a small garden, rather larger than those usually attached to villas. A smart parlour-maid opened the door to the Moncrieffes, and ushered them into a large room on the ground floor, which reached from the front to the back of the house, and was divided in the middle by an arch and looped-up curtains. No one was in the front room, but Constance perceived a stout lady seated in an arm-chair in the back room, and had advanced through the arch to meet her, before the latter had well raised her rather unwieldy person from the depths of her chair.

"How do you do?" began Mrs Fortescue, taking Constance's hand coldly in her own for an instant, and gazing in a perplexed sort of manner from the bride to Moncrieffe, and back again. "Will you sit down?" she added, in a hesitating way, "the tea will be in directly."

Then she sank back into her seat, feeling that she had done all the occasion demanded. She had evidently been a pretty woman once, and her fair hair, sleepy blue eyes, and soft, rosy cheeks, still gave her some pretensions to good looks. She sat and stared at Constance for a minute, while the latter made some trivial remark; then suddenly raising her handkerchief to her eyes, she began to whimper softly to herself. This was dreadful! Constance and Bruce exchanged mutual glances

of dismay, and the latter inquired briskly whether any of the girls were at home.

"I believe some of them are in the garden," replied Mrs Fortescue plaintively; and rising heavily, she waddled across to the bow window which overlooked the garden behind the house. "Yes, there they are, playing tennis with the Days," she said; and opening the window, she called: "Girls! come here. Here's your father, Julia. Harry has gone down to the pier with Daisy and Adelaide," she added, turning to Moncrieffe.

Then she sank back into her arm-chair, with a sigh, just as a young girl of fifteen flew in through the open window, and flung herself delightedly into her father's arms. She was a pretty-looking girl, with fair hair, and pale blue eyes like her grandmother. At present she was a little slight thing, but Constance saw at a glance that she would some day develop into a woman exactly like Mrs Fortescue.

"Dear, dear papa!" cooed the girl softly, as she clung to Moncrieffe's arms, and gazed lovingly up in his face, "how awfully jolly it is to have you back again."

"And this is your new mamma, Julia, my darling," said Moncrieffe, as he stroked his child's fair head tenderly.

Julia turned her fair, innocent face towards Constance, still with the smile resting on it, and submitted passively to the kind em-

brace which her young step-mother bestowed upon her. But she made no attempt to respond to it, and there was a kind of gentle indifference in her manner which chilled Constance.

"How do you do, mamma?" she said, demurely; and then she turned back to her father, who had seen nothing amiss in her manner to his wife, and who drew her down on to the sofa beside him, with his arm round her shoulders.

Here everyone became conscious that Mrs Fortescue was shedding a few quiet tears (probably at hearing her dead daughter's child calling a stranger "*mamma*"); but no one pretended to notice the fact, and just then the entrance of Emily Fortescue, and the two Miss Days, caused a diversion.

Miss Fortescue was a stout, commanding-looking young woman of eight-and-twenty. Her hair and complexion were dark, and her figure tall and fine, and she was one of those people who can make themselves extremely agreeable, or very much the reverse, just as the fancy takes them. She had the entire management of the house, and it was she who had, at Moncrieffe's request, written to invite Constance here. She had had a succession of love affairs ever since she was fifteen; but somehow she had not got married, and people said her failures had spoilt her temper. She shook hands politely, if not very cordially,

with Constance, and introduced her to Carry and Netta Day; two rather gushing young women, of eighteen and twenty-four.

"We are great friends with Harry and Julia, dear Mrs Moncrieffe," began Carry, the elder, effusively; "so you must let us be great friends with you too."

"I hope so," replied Constance quietly, and with a slight bend of her head.

She did not like Miss Day's expression or manner; the former striking her as rather sly, and the latter as insincere and slightly impertinent. She watched her husband narrowly, and was convinced, by the way in which he shook hands with Miss Day, that he did not particularly like her either.

Miss Fortescue sat in front of the little tea-table pouring out the tea, and Netta Day perched herself artlessly on the arm of her chair, with one arm round Emily's neck, and whispered nonsense in her ear; Carry Day seated herself decorously beside Mrs Moncrieffe, and joined in the polite conversation that was being carried on between the latter and Miss Fortescue; and Julia and her father sat side by side on their sofa, entirely taken up with each other. No one could have called Moncrieffe cold now, as he sat stroking his child's fair hair, and gazing down on her soft, infantine face, with that grave, loving smile of his.

Constance could not prevent herself watch-

ing the pair covertly all the while she was talking to Miss Fortescue. This was the first time she had ever seen that beautiful smile on her husband's face, or had conceived it possible for him to drop his grave reserve so entirely; and it gave her a strange shock to see him expanding under the influence of his daughter's smiles, as he had never expanded under hers. True, she had never clung to him with Julia's pretty, child-like *abandon;* but then young brides generally expect their husbands to love them of their own accord. Constance stood in considerable awe of her grave husband, and would not have ventured to tease and caress him boldly, as Julia, who was confident of her own power over him, was doing; but her heart swelled bitterly within her as she saw the marked difference between his manner towards Julia, and that with which he had always treated herself. To her he had always been kind and attentive; but to Julia he was *tender.* What wonder that the young wife's heart turned cold and sick within her, and that her voice grew strained and hard as she replied to the observations addressed to her? Miss Day's fawning familiarity irritated her almost beyond endurance; and Miss Fortescue's coldly civil manner did not tend to set her at her ease. From the first she had taken an intense dislike to the Days, and fancying that they must be some of those "Brighton friends" of the girls, of whom her

husband had spoken so disparagingly, she did not respond very cordially to Miss Carry's advances.

It was a relief to her when at length Emily Fortescue suggested that she might like to go upstairs to her room and take off her bonnet and mantle. Emily led the way upstairs herself, and appeared anxious to make friends with the new mistress of Moncrieffe Castle; but under all her efforts at friendliness there lay a certain stiffness, that showed Constance how great a disappointment Bruce's marriage had been to his first wife's relatives. She was longing to be alone for a little while, but on entering her room, she found her maid busy unpacking such of her things as she would require during her stay here. So she removed her out-door things, and after lingering a little while, and showing the woman what she wished to wear for dinner that evening, she returned slowly to the drawing-room. This time no one was in the back-room; but through the draped curtains she could see Carry Day standing by the fire in the front-room, with her arm passed affectionately round the waist of a tall, handsome girl, apparently of eighteen, and who was dressed in a walking costume which struck Constance as being rather too showy for good taste. Could this be Harriet, she wondered. Harriet was not quite seventeen, and Daisy Fortescue was twenty. It might be either of them, or it

might be neither ; and for a minute Constance stood irresolute, uncertain whether to intrude upon the *tête-à-tête.*

"What is she like?" she had heard the strange girl ask as she entered; and now Carry was replying in her purring tones:

"Well, dear, I can't say I like her much myself; but that may be because she snubbed me so unmercifully. It is always the way with poor people, when they get a sudden rise in life ; they are like the beggar on horseback, you know. But she is very pretty, and her manner is soft and conciliatory—to most people at least. But I always mistrust those sugary sort of people, especially when they give themselves airs to poor insignificant people like me, whom they don't consider it worth their while to sugar. I suppose your father was taken by her pretty face—"

But here it flashed across Constance that she herself was the person under discussion, and turning hastily, she quitted the room as softly as she had entered it, feeling more disposed to dislike Miss Day than ever. The idea of speaking of her like that to Harriet (for Constance felt convinced it must be Harriet)! It was wicked and unprincipled to try deliberately to make mischief in a family, and what possible object could the girl have? It must be innate viciousness and love of mischief on her part.

Constance fancied that her exit had been

unobserved by the two girls in the front room, but unfortunately Carry had caught sight of the tail of her dark blue dress as she swept out of the back-room, and uttered a little cry of dismay, which made Harry ask what was the matter.

"Matter enough, my dear," replied Miss Day, her sallow face flushing a dark, unbecoming red. "Your step-mother has been in the other room, listening to all we said."

"Impossible!" exclaimed Harry incredulously.

"I thought I heard some one moving in there," persisted Carry, "and when I looked I saw the end of Mrs Moncrieffe's dress disappearing."

"I wonder if she heard much?" speculated Harry uncomfortably.

"She must have been listening for some time."

"Well it serves her right if she heard herself abused," cried Harry defiantly. "I don't care a straw what she heard."

"I told you I distrusted her," said Miss Day spitefully. She had resented the bride's want of cordiality to herself from the first, but had still hoped to become tolerable friends with her in the end. But now she saw that they must always be enemies, and that it would be useless to attempt to conciliate her further. "Of course she will hate us both like poison now," she continued, feeding Harry's wrath. "I daresay

she will think it her best policy to try and conciliate you, so she won't show what she feels very likely."

"She sha'n't take *me* in," retorted Harry, with more vigour than elegance.

"I know you're not one to let yourself be brow-beaten," sighed Carry, "but I do wish she had not heard me speak of her as I did."

"Why? It can't matter to you."

"Yes it can. It would matter very much to me if she tried to put an end to your friendship for me."

"She needn't try *that*," cried Harry angrily.

"She mayn't succeed, but she'll try it on, you'll see. She won't let you have me to stay with you at Moncrieffe Castle; and she will very likely try to prevent your writing to me."

Harry's indignation at this suggestion was unbounded, and she assured her dear friend warmly that she *should* come to Moncrieffe Castle next year; and that nothing earthly should ever put an end to their friendship.

Miss Day smiled, and sighed, and said she hoped her dear Harry would never change; and then she went out into the garden to look for Netta, saying it was high time for them to be going home.

CHAPTER IV.

MRS FORTESCUE'S REQUEST.

WHEN Constance beat her hasty retreat from the drawing-room, she returned to her own room, and told her maid that she intended to dress for dinner at once. It was not yet time to do so, but she hardly liked to return to the drawing-room at once, and felt too restless and uneasy to sit down and read her book, as her maid suggested. So she performed her toilette, and then returned to the drawing-room, which she expected to find empty, carrying a piece of pretty work in her hand. But on entering the drawing-room, she found Julia there in advance of her, also dressed for dinner.

"So I am not the first after all," she began, smiling kindly at the girl.

"No; I dressed early because I mistook the time," replied Julia innocently, though really she had hastened her toilette in hopes of being ready to receive a certain Captain Newman

who was to dine here to-night, and who usually arrived half-an-hour before the time appointed, alone. She looked so childish, however, that no one would have suspected her for a minute of having any hidden motives, and Constance was glad of this opportunity of making friends with her.

"Shall you be glad to go abroad?" she asking, seating herself near Julia.

"I don't know," replied the latter vacantly, and looking anywhere except at her step-mother.

"I think you will enjoy it, especially as you have never been on the Continent before."

"Have you?"

"No, never."

"Oh!" murmured Julia; and turning her eyes upon her step-mother for the first time, she regarded her with an air of calm curiosity. "I thought you had from your tone," she added, naively.

"Did you?" replied Constance, smiling, but feeling vaguely uncomfortable under her step-daughter's steady stare. "But you see you were mistaken; we have got to visit it for the first time together."

Julia yawned prettily behind her fan, and gazed out of the window, as if the conversation did not interest her much.

"Were you very much surprised to hear that your father was going to marry again, dear?" asked Constance, desirous of waking some show of life and interest in the girl.

"Oh no," replied Julia placidly. "Papa has intended to marry a long time you know. He only waited till Harry came out."

A quick flush mounted to Constance's face, and then died away, leaving her deadly pale. Was this girl intentionally cruel, or intensely stupid? she wondered, looking at Julia's soft face, which at present wore a particularly vacant expression. She had just decided in favour of the stupidity, when Julia added, sweetly: "But I was surprised at your coming *here;*" and again Constance felt inclined to believe that the girl spoke with *malice prepense;* for she was conscious that it was hardly good taste of her husband to have brought her, his second bride, to the home of his first wife—and indeed it was only his wish to take his children abroad with him that had induced him to do so.

"It was your father's wish, dear," said Constance quietly. "He had to pick you up, since you were going abroad with us—and he wished me to see you and make friends with you as soon as possible."

"Oh!" drawled Julia, with a very faint elevation of her indistinct eyebrows, which might have meant everything or nothing.

"And I hope we shall be friends, dear," proceeded Constance. To this Julia's only response was a soft, wondering stare, and just then a diversion was caused by the entrance of a fine, dark-browed girl, whom Constance instantly recognised as Harriet.

"How do you do, Mrs Moncreiffe?" she said, advancing and holding out her hand to her step-mother, who had risen on her entrance. "I'm Harry," she added, tersely, and holding her head proudly erect, so that Constance could not kiss her.

"You must not call me Mrs Moncrieffe, my dear; it sounds so formal," said Constance gently, but feeling somewhat nervous; for Harry was the daughter about whom Bruce himself seemed to have doubts, and she certainly looked a very uncompromising young lady.

"I can't call you mamma," replied the girl firmly; while Julia laughed softly, and remarked that "Harry was so odd!"

"Well, call me Constance then," said Constance, smiling. "After all, I am only a few years older than you."

The look of supreme disdain with which Harry regarded her as she said this, made Constance painfully aware that her manner must appear as *sugary* as Miss Day had called it, in her step-daughter's eyes; but what could she do? She dared not resent the girl's coldness openly, else she would bring about a regular quarrel between them on this, their first meeting. Things were awkward enough as it was; but Julia came to the rescue, and observed,—

"Now, Harry, dinner will be ready in twenty minutes, and you have not taken off

your hat yet. You always are so unpunctual, and you know what a rage grandpapa was in with you yesterday because you were late for dinner."

"I'm off," replied Harry impatiently, bouncing out of one door just as the smart parlour maid ushered in Captain Newman by the other.

At that minute sweet little Julia hated her step-mother most fervently and heartily. She had dressed early on purpose to receive Captain Newman alone; and now it seemed to her that Constance had dressed early also for the express purpose of thwarting her. She was just old enough to have found out that she could flirt as well as any of her aunts; and was yet young enough to believe that all the light compliments that were paid her, were seriously meant. Captain Newman had paid her a little good-natured attention because he saw it pleased her; and she, little fool, fancied that she had made a conquest. Captain Newman was a little, fair, rosy man of five-and-thirty, and the very essence of good nature and fidgetiness. He was always haunted by a horror of being late, and consequently was generally much too early wherever he went—often to the great annoyance of his hosts.

Julia had taken advantage of this peculiarity of his, to secure several *tête-à-têtes* with him. She always had some good excuse to make,

but the little captain understood all about it, and was immensely amused, though he humoured Julia good-naturedly. She was not a very pretty girl, but merely a rather pretty one, whom some people admired, and some did not; and Captain Newman was one of those who did rather admire her, and rather liked flirting with her. And it could do her no harm, he reflected; for after all she was only a child. There was no doubt about his admiration of Constance, however, and he sat and talked quietly to her, only turning now and then to make some joking remark to Julia, who, however, seemed rather sulky, and presently left the room in a pet—Constance being, it is needless to say, utterly unconscious of the storm she had raised. Soon the various members of the family assembled in the drawing-room, and Constance was introduced to Adelaide and Daisy Fortescue, two showy-looking girls of twenty and twenty-one, who hardly took the trouble of speaking to her, so absorbed were they with two other young officers (*not* Captain Newman), who were dining with them to-night. General Fortescue, an irritable, white-haired old Indian, handed Constance into dinner, and as Harry was not ready when the gong sounded, Julia got her seat at table next to Captain Newman. But again the little captain talked almost exclusively to Constance, who was seated on his other hand, and who was glad to talk to him instead of

to General Fortescue, who was deaf, and never heard anything she said.

"She does it on purpose," thought Julia angrily, and she hated her step-mother more cordially than ever.

Presently, when the soup was being removed, Harry came rushing in, and nearly upset the waitress, who had her hands full of soup plates. General Fortescue began to rate his grand-daughter roundly for her unpunctuality, and she laughed carelessly and good-naturedly, but slightly disrespectfully, as she made her way to her seat between Julia and her youngest aunt, Daisy.

"Hullo, Harry, haven't you got a word for me?" asked Moncrieffe, who had not yet seen his eldest daughter.

"How do you do, papa?" said the girl coldly, and seating herself more firmly in her chair.

She was determined to let her father see what she thought of his conduct in marrying again, and sat all through dinner with her head held proudly erect, and carefully avoided meeting her father's eyes. He watched her rather anxiously, and felt somewhat inclined to be angry with her; but then he reflected that his marriage must naturally be a great blow to the silly child, and trusted to time; her own good sense; and Constance's sweetness, to win her round.

When the ladies retired to the drawing-

room, after dinner, Adelaide suggested sending over to the next villa, and asking Tottie Minchin and her two brothers to come in and spend the evening with them; and Emily, who was virtually mistress of the house, consenting, a little note was despatched to Miss Minchin by the smart maid. Then the gentlemen came in from the dining-room, and there was a good deal of laughing and talking, and some music.

Emily, who had a strong but not very musical voice, sang a couple of comic songs, and was greatly applauded; and Adelaide played a new waltz that had lately come out. She could play a piece tolerably well at a dinner party, but she knew that a waltz would suit the taste of the present company better than anything. Then Miss Fortescue inquired politely whether Constance sang, and the latter sat down at the piano and sang a sweet Italian sang in her musical, clear, soprano voice. She had been well taught before her father's death, and since then had taken great pains to keep up her singing, and she had always been accustomed to receive warm praise whenever she sang; but to-night her music fell flat, and though one or two murmured that she had a lovely voice, her song was not applauded as Miss Fortescue's had been.

The young people had laughed over the comic songs, and had talked freely all through Adelaide's waltz; but they would neither laugh nor talk while Constance sang, and

found it rather a bore, for though her voice was pretty, they did not care for the music. Harry, indeed, withdrew into the back drawing-room with one of the officers, and laughed and talked away during the entire song; and Constance, feeling that the sympathy of her audience was not with her, could not sing as well as usual, and rose from the instrument feeling angry and mortified. It was not because *she* had not been applauded as Emily Fortescue had been that she felt so hurt, it was the idea of anyone preferring comic songs, sung in Emily's hard voice, to the good music she had sung, that stirred her indignation.

"You must have some more lessons when we go to town next spring," said her husband kindly, as she returned to her seat. *He* had appreciated her music, and wished to please her by what he said; but she fancied he meant that she required more teaching to make her singing worth hearing, and flushed slightly as she replied that she was afraid she could never learn to sing comic songs.

"Why is mamma so cross?" whispered Julia, who was seated on a sofa beside her father.

Captain Newman had been sitting on her other side, and she had been chatting prettily to both gentlemen; but Constance's song had interrupted the conversation, and now the little captain had betaken himself off to Mrs Moncrieffe's side, and Julia was feeling very

cross herself as she asked her question, with her innocent blue eyes raised wonderingly to her father's.

Constance heard the girl's words, though she did not hear Moncrieffe's reply, and again she flushed and bit her lip. Of course she knew it was very absurd of her to be vexed because they had not cared for her music; but she was very sensitive, and it was this very sensitiveness that rendered her peculiarly unfit for the difficult post she had to fill. Every slighting word or look wounded her sorely, and being very fond of her music, she felt any slight cast on it, as deeply as an unkindness done to herself. Very absurd of course; but unfortunately people cannot help their feelings, only those who are so thin-skinned ought not to accept disagreeable positions. Constance's position was certainly not an agreeable one, and her heart sank as she heard Julia's words to Moncrieffe, and the thought occurred to her, "Could the girl wish to make mischief?" But no, she told herself, it was impossible; Julia was a stupid, tactless child; that was surely the worst that could be said of her.

Presently the three Minchins came in, and then Emily sat down and played a waltz, and the young people all danced in the back drawing-room, while Mrs Fortescue and the bride sat and talked quietly in the front room.

Captain Newman pressed Constance to

dance, but though she was very fond of waltzing, she declined, knowing that her husband objected to married women dancing.

"Does Bruce not let you dance?" asked Mrs Fortescue. "It is very absurd of him to think that, because a girl is married, she is to turn into an old woman at once," she continued, not heeding Constance's protestation that she did not care to dance. "I remember my poor Julia had sad work with him about it—but he was younger then, and easier to manage; and he was so fond of her too, poor darling, he could never say her nay about anything."

Here Mrs Fortescue paused to wipe away a few tears, and Constance hastened to change the conversation by remarking how well Julia danced.

"Yes," replied Mrs Fortescue, "she dances better than Harry, though she is not out, and has not had so much practice."

"They are pretty girls," said the young step-mother, thinking to please their grandmother.

"Yes, they are," smiled Mrs Fortescue. "To my taste Julia is the prettiest; but Harry is the greatest favourite with the men. She has been quite a success since she came out. She is so frank and unaffected, and unlike other girls."

"They both look old for their age," said Constance. "Julia's face is very youthful,

of course, but I suppose it is her long dress that makes her look quite a young lady."

"Yes; she does not look at all like a school-girl, does she?" smiled the old lady. "She will be sixteen in January. She was to have come out next Christmas if she had remained with us—but I suppose it will be different now?" with a sigh.

"I do not know; I suppose it will depend on her father," replied Constance evasively.

"He has an absurd prejudice against girls coming out early—as if youth wasn't meant for enjoyment! And girls are so much more taking when they're young too. I don't mean shy school-girls; but nice, frank girls like Harry and Julia; men are often much more taken with them when they are quite young and fresh. I married when I was only sixteen (that's how I come to have grown-up grand-children at fifty-one), and my two sisters both married before they were twenty—but they're dead now, poor things. Mrs Graham was my half-sister, you know; her mother was my father's first wife, and she was twenty years older than I was. My eldest sister married before she did. Mr Graham was her cousin on her mother's side, and he was the only lover she ever had. It is strange what a difference there is in girls. I had several love affairs before I married, and my own sisters had lots of offers too. My poor daughter, Julia, was only seventeen when she married, and I think

her daughters will be like her, and go off soon too. My other girls take more after their father's family."

Constance sat and listened to this eloquent discourse in calm silence, and Mrs Fortescue saw that she was not so much impressed as she ought to have been by hearing what a "marrying" family hers (Mrs Fortescue's) was. Indeed Mrs Fortescue fancied she detected a very faint curl on the bride's pretty lips, and she was deeply offended accordingly. But she had a point to gain, and after hesitating a few minutes she continued persuasively,—

"There was a young fellow we knew here a short time ago—he has gone out to an uncle of his who is a coffee planter in Ceylon now. He was very much attached to Julia, poor boy, and was nearly broken-hearted at having to leave her. Of course it was absurd, for they are both children; still boy and girl friendships do come to something sometimes, you know."

Mrs Fortescue paused, and gazed anxiously at young Mrs Moncrieffe, who inquired quietly what the young man's name was.

"Archie Bird. He is a remarkably handsome young man—Julia must show you his portrait; he gave her a very pretty locket before he went away, with a likeness of himself in it. He is only nineteen, and Julia is not quite sixteen, so of course it is absurd to think of anything between them

yet—but Archie, poor boy, begged leave to write to her sometimes, and I let him. He will come into a little money when he is of age, and he is likely to do well with his uncle in Ceylon; still I daresay Julia ought to do better, with her money, and one thing and another."

"I should think so," acquiesced Constance drily.

"But you will not put a stop to her writing to him, will you?" urged Mrs Fortescue. "Julia begged me to speak to you about it—she did not like to do so herself. It can do no possible harm to allow her to answer the poor lad's letters. She is such a child, and of course if she met anyone else she wished to marry there is nothing to prevent her, for there need be no formal engagement between her and Archie. Only she likes writing to him, you know."

"I would rather have nothing to do with it, Mrs Fortescue," replied Constance coldy. "If her father allows Julia to amuse herself with the affections of this young fellow, I should not of course think of interfering."

"But Bruce Moncrieffe has such absurd notions, I have never told him of this affair; and Julia was hoping you would use your influence with him to let her go on as she is doing."

"I could never influence him to do anything he did not approve of, Mrs Fortescue."

"But what is there to disapprove of in a boy and girl writing to each other sometimes? I should say it was '*Honi soit qui mal-y-pense.*' Besides it would be cruel to the poor boy."

"Don't you think it will be worse for him if Julia lets him go on thinking she cares for him, and then, in a little while, writes and tells him she is going to be married to someone else?" suggested Constance quietly.

"Of course it would be painful for Julia. I remember I had to do just the same thing myself when *I* married. The young man was so fond of me, all his friends were in a fright lest he should do something desperate to himself when I married Mr Bland," and Mrs Fortescue sighed, and smiled complacently at the remembrance.

"Well I have no authority in this matter," replied Constance coldly.

"Can't you influence Bruce?"

"He would not let me influence him in a matter of this sort."

"You think he will put a stop to the correspondence?"

"I really cannot tell."

"But you think it probable?"

"I think it would be like him to do so."

"Yes, that is just it; it would be like him to do so. But don't you think—why need he know anything about it?"

"I cannot keep it a secret from him, if that is what you mean, Mrs Fortescue."

"Surely there could be no harm?"

"I could not do such a thing."

"I am afraid you will make enemies of the girls if you begin to clip their liberty," said the elder lady solemnly, her pink cap-strings vibrating with her agitation.

"I shall not attempt to do so; but you should not have told me this, if you wished it kept a secret from my husband."

"It will be very uncomfortable for you if you make enemies of the girls," proceeded Mrs Fortescue excitedly. "Their father fairly doats on them, and they have great influence with him in every way."

"You need not employ threats, Mrs Fortescue," said Constance proudly, though she turned very pale. "I can neither do more nor less than my duty."

Mrs Fortescue was very red, and very indignant; but she said no more, and Constance rising moved away to another part of the room, and so ended the discussion for that time.

CHAPTER V.

A BAD BEGINNING.

WHEN Constance told her husband of her conversation with Mrs Fortescue, that same night, he was very indignant, especially at the idea of their having tried to make his wife help to deceive him.

"I don't blame Julia, poor child," he said; "she knows no better; but Mrs Fortescue's conduct is disgraceful. You see now that I had good reason to dislike leaving my girls with her. Indeed, I think I ought to have married long ago—only I never could make up my mind to do so, till I met you, dear," he added, hastily, and patted her hand, conscious that what he had been about to say might hurt her, and not at all understanding that she had finished his sentence for him, in her own mind.

"I hope Julia won't think I have interfered," sighed Constance wearily.

"How can she? you have simply done your duty in telling me about this; and I will speak to her. It was disgraceful of Mrs Fortescue to teach the child to deceive me—I trust to you to teach her better in future."

"Mrs Fortescue seems a very silly person."

"I don't think I ever knew a sillier! One would have thought she'd have taken warning by that affair of Adelaide's last year—did I tell you? Adelaide was engaged to a Major Longman—a very good match indeed for her; but, unfortunately, he found that she was receiving letters from someone else, and broke off with her. It made a good deal of talk here at the time—of course a thing of that sort injures a girl for life."

The husband and wife agreed that it would be better to say nothing to Julia about young Mr Bird while she was here, with her grandmother to back her up in her folly. They were only to be here a few days, and it would be a pity, they thought, to have any disputes during them.

All the next morning Constance sat in the drawing-room, doing fancy work, and trying to talk to Mrs Fortescue, who entertained her with some more accounts of her own and her daughters' love affairs. Mrs Fortescue was a little stiff, and Constance was feeling dull and spiritless, so the conversation flagged sadly. Harry and Daisy were out riding, and Adelaide was out somewhere with the Minchins;

and Julia was at her studies during the morning. Emily was busy somewhere, and only came into the drawing-room once or twice for a few minutes; so Constance and Mrs Fortescue had to entertain each other as best they could. Lunch was at half-past one, and at half-past Julia came in from the school-room, yawning, and observing that her tutor (she had a tutor instead of a governess) was a beastly old fool! The words sounded strange, coming from her soft little mouth; but Mrs Fortescue paid no heed to them, and Constance felt that it was too early for her to begin to reprove her step-children yet.

"Did you mention what I told you last night to your husband?" asked Mrs Fortescue, who had been burning to put the question all the morning, and had now chosen the minute when Julia happened to be in the room, to do so.

"Of course I did," replied Constance firmly; and Mrs Fortescue said, "Oh! indeed!" and grew rosy red, while Julia, who understood perfectly what they alluded to, marked down another score against her step-mother in her heart, and vowed she would "pay her out" for her ill nature. She had an opportunity of doing so sooner than she had expected. Just then Harry came into the room in her habit, and with a bright colour in her cheeks from her ride. She stood at the table for a minute, reading a note that had come for her, and then

went upstairs to take off her habit whistling at the top of her voice.

"Isn't Harry funny?" said Julia, raising her invisible eyebrows. "She'd make a capital boy."

"Oh! if only she had been a boy!" sighed Mrs Fortescue plaintively.

"Oh, if one of us had been a son, papa wouldn't have married again," said Julia simply.

Constance flushed crimson, and Emily Fortescue, who had come into the room just as Harry left it, exclaimed sharply,—

"You're a little fool, Julia! what do you know about it, I should like to know?"

"I don't see anything to be so cross about," said Julia, opening her blue eyes, with a bewildered expression. "I know papa doesn't want Moncrieffe to belong to anyone who isn't a Moncrieffe; and unless he has a son of his own, it must go out of the family. It is very natural he should want a son."

"I don't see why he should wish to take the bread out of his own children's mouths," struck in Mrs Fortescue complainingly.

"No, indeed," acquiesced Emily; "especially as he is so fond of them. But Julia doesn't understand what she's talking about."

"Yes I do," pouted Julia. "I understand quite well. And don't you remember when papa wrote to tell us of his engagement, he said he might have hesitated about marrying,

on our account, if we had not been so well provided for already, thanks to Mrs Graham?"

But here Constance rose and left the room, with burning cheeks, and Emily began to administer a sharp rebuke to Julia.

"You're an awful little goose to make an enemy of your step-mother," she began.

"Why, what have I done?" asked Julia.

"Oh, you needn't try to take *me* in with your innocent airs! I know you well enough; and I think you are both very foolish and very cruel to behave as you are doing."

Emily had the name of being the bad-tempered one of the family, and no doubt she was so; but there is a vast difference between bad temper and ill nature, and just now she was sorry for young Mrs Moncrieffe, and disgusted with Julia. But here the entrance of General Fortescue, who was storming because luncheon was ten minutes late, put an end to her lecture; which was perhaps as well, since it would have had no effect on her niece, except to perhaps increase her animosity to her step-mother. At luncheon Julia sat beside Constance, and talked to, and smiled upon her, in a way that completely bewildered the latter. She had expected that Julia would be conscious and constrained in her manner towards her, after what had occurred before luncheon; but the girl was as sweet to her as if nothing had happened, and Constance began to think that perhaps she had been too hasty in taking

offence. It was perfectly true that her husband had married her for convenience rather than love, and Julia had only spoken the simple truth, without perhaps understanding the full meaning of what she said. Certainly her manner now contrasted strongly with that of Harry, who sat beside her father in frigid silence, or answered him coldly whenever he addressed her.

That afternoon the two sisters walked off together to the Days' house. It was one of the faults Moncrieffe found with Mrs Fortescue's management, that she allowed the girls to walk about the town alone, but though he saw his daughters setting out for their walk, he did not like to interfere yet. Time enough, he reflected, when he and Constance had got them to themselves.

"How can you be so foolish as to quarrel with papa in the way you are doing?" began Julia mildly, as she and her sister left the house.

"I don't quarrel with him," replied Harry.

"You are so funny; you never do things like other people," laughed Julia, who was very fond of lecturing her elder sister.

"And you're most awfully fond of meddling in what isn't your business," returned Harry promptly.

"But this is my business as much as yours," presisted Julia, softly but firmly. "You are always perfectly civil to mamma—"

"How can you call her *that*, Julia!" interrupted Harry hotly.

"To please papa, of course. *I* don't want to offend him, and alienate his affection as you are doing. As I say, you are perfectly civil to his wife, aud keep all your bad temper for him. *I* intend to keep his love. He cares for us twice as much as he does for mamma, I am sure; and I don't want to let him think she is better than we are."

By this time they had reached the Days' house, and found Carry at home. Carry, though so much older than the Moncrieffes, was a tremendous favourite with them, and had that influence over them which older girls, who are well versed in the ways of the world, often possess over inexperienced ones, just beginning to try their wings. Netta Day was perhaps Julia's greater friend of the two sisters; but Harry infinitely preferred Carry, and was wont to offend Julia mortally at times, by declaring that Netta was silly, and mimicking her little affectations of manner and speech. To-day Netta happened to be out, so the Moncrieffes had Carry to themselves, and Julia instantly referred their dispute to her, and asked her whether she did not think Harry very foolish to offend her father as she was doing. Carry quite agreed with Julia, and her word having considerable weight with Harry, the latter promised to behave better in future towards her father—nothing

was said about her conduct to Constance, however.

Then Julia poured her grievance about Archie Bird into Carry's sympathetic ear, and Harry listened, boiling over with hot indignation; for it is needless to say that Julia gave an entirely false colouring to the affair, though she stuck to the main facts. She made out that Constance had drawn Mrs Fortescue on to confide in her, by pretending to sympathise keenly in all she said (Mrs Fortescue had said something of the sort to Julia, to excuse herself for having broached the subject of Archie to Mrs Moncrieffe); and after worming all she could out of her, had turned round and expressed her intention of telling everything to her husband.

To all this Harry listened with curling lips, and flashing eyes. She had never quite approved of her sister's conduct towards young Bird, and was far too honest and off-hand herself, to have kept a youth whom she had very little intention of ever marrying, dangling at her chariot wheels. She had had several admirers herself already; but though she enjoyed flirting with them, and was rather apt to do so more openly than was quite prudent, yet the instant they showed signs of becoming "serious," or asked her any direct questions, she was too open and impulsive to go on deceiving them. Still Harry had always been accustomed to the ways of flirtation and

coquetry, and she did not see Julia's conduct in its true light. Her step-mother's behaviour, however, filled her with the profoundest contempt and indignation, and as Julia concluded her tale, she exclaimed, hotly,—

"What earthly business had Mrs Moncrieffe to interfere, I should like to know? It is no affair of *hers* who you write to. And to tell papa, after promising not to!"

"It was awfully mean," said Miss Day sympathetically. "But I could believe anything of her after the way she played eavesdropper to us yesterday."

"And papa thinks her so good and all the rest of it," said Julia, with a little sneer.

"Oh, of course she only showed herself to *him* in her best light," laughed Carry Day. "I have no doubt she worked awfully hard to catch him. It was a splendid match for her."

Harry flushed and bit her lip savagely.

"He spoke to me once last year as if he thought of marrying," she said, thoughtfully. "But I never believed he really meant to; he always was so fond of poor mamma. Oh! Carry, if he had married at all, I wish he had married *you*, you dear old thing."

"Thank you, you pert young thing," laughed Miss Day, who had once entertained similar thoughts herself. "But I don't think I am *quite* old enough to be your mother yet."

"You are a year older than Mrs Moncrieffe."

"But I don't consider that she is half old

enough. An old step-mother must be bad enough, but a young one must be ten times worse."

"Why?" asked Harry anxiously.

"Oh, can't you understand? a pretty young woman is far more likely to dislike her pretty step-daughters, than an elderly one would be. And I expect you will find Mrs Moncrieffe very interfering."

"She'd better not try that game with *me*," cried Harry, with a flash of her fine eyes.

"Well, supposing we go out now," suggested Julia, who had been growing rather fidgety. "We are losing all the best of the day."

So they sallied forth presently with Miss Day, and betook themselves to the pier, where the band was playing, and where Julia had the felicity of meeting little Captain Newman again.

CHAPTER VI.

IN PARIS.

AFTER this Harry's manner towards her father softened insensibly. Deep down in her heart there lay the unacknowledged conviction that her father was more to blame for marrying Constance, than Constance was for marrying him. He had his children to think of; whereas she was probably not conscious of injuring anyone when she consented to become his wife. But then Harry was fond of her father, and disposed to forgive him; while on the other hand she was constantly on the watch for something to take offence at in her step-mother's conduct. If we watch for causes of offence, we are pretty sure to find them by the dozen; and words and actions that would have passed unnoticed by us under other circumstances, assume a new and significant aspect in our prejudiced eyes. So it was with Harry now. She was constantly fancying she discerned a disposition

to "interfere" in her step-mother, and resented it by never doing anything the latter suggested. She had been disgusted by the way in which Constance had seemed to spy upon her and Carry Day, on the first day of her arrival here; and she was furious at the idea of her attempting to interfere between Julia and young Bird.

"What business was it of *hers?*" Harry asked, indignantly; and then to betray grandmamma's confidence to papa, after expressly promising not to! it seemed awfully mean; and to Harry's young mind "meanness" was one of the cardinal sins. Then, too, Carry Day disliked the bride, and she was Harry's oracle. The Days had had a step-mother too, and dreadful were the tales of her cruelty and oppression which they repeated to the Moncrieffes. She was dead now, and Miss Day reigned in her stead; but the Fortescues remembered her well, and confirmed all Carry and Netta's stories about her. There was no doubt she had been a bad step-mother. She had always appeared soft and amiable outwardly, but she had made dreadful mischief between the girls and their father, and had finally driven them from the house, and obliged them to take refuge with an aunt. She had died, however, after two years of married life, and since then, Carry and her sister had come back to live with their father. It was, perhaps, natural that they should have

a prejudice against step-mothers as a race, and they were all the more inclined to object to young Mrs Moncrieffe, because she had reminded them of their own step-mother.

The second Mrs Day had been a young woman, not so much older than Carry, and she had interfered between the latter and her lover, and got Mr Day to put an end to the engagement. Carry always gave this as the reason why she had not married yet; and she expressed a fervent hope, with tears in her eyes, that young Mrs Moncrieffe did not intend to behave in a similar manner to Harry and Julia. The Moncrieffe girls grew frightened and angry as they listened to their friend, who, had they but known it, would so dearly have liked to be in Constance's place. Harry was far too hasty and impetuous to consider the situation calmly and justly; she was one to rush to extremes in everything, and she believed all Carry and Julia said about Constance, blindly, and with the perfect faith of sixteen. It was partly the dread lest Mrs Moncrieffe should attempt to alienate Moncrieffe's affection from his children, as Mrs Day had done her husband's, that induced Harry to adopt a more conciliatory manner towards her father. She did not drop her proud reserve all at once, but she suffered him to thaw it; and he was much relieved when he found he could win a smile from her, and that she no longer answered his advances

in freezing monosyllables. To her step-mother Harry was coldly civil, and no more. She never kissed her, or spoke to her if she could help it; but so far there had been no open clash between them. Julia, on the other hand, was sweetness itself. She kissed her step-mother prettily morning and evening; always called her "mamma," and smiled when she spoke to her. To her father she was more demonstratively loving and affectionate than she had ever been before, and he was quite enchanted with her behaviour.

"Didn't I tell you what a sweet little thing she was?" he said, triumphantly, to his wife. "And Harry is coming round too, poor child."

"Yes, with *you*," replied the wife slowly.

"And with you too, dear. Julia's example will do her good."

"Somehow I don't feel as if Julia liked me any better than Harry, really," sighed Constance despondingly. "She is civil to me to please you, but I *feel* that she dislikes me as much as her sister does."

"That is nonsense," replied Moncrieffe coldly. "I should not have thought you could have been so unjust to the poor child. In my opinion, she could not be sweeter than she is."

Constance said no more, but she flushed hotly, and the tears rose to her eyes, though she managed to prevent them falling. She

had not been married a fortnight, and already her husband was telling her coldly that she spoke "nonsense," and accusing her of injustice towards his child.

He, on his side, had no intention of being unkind to his wife; but he was provoked with her for harbouring such unjust suspicions (as he considered them) of poor little Julia. Surely the child had done all in her power to be pleasant and friendly, and here was Constance refusing to believe in her, and making no attempt to meet her advances half way. In the drawing-room Constance never seemed to talk to the girls. With Harry this was perhaps natural, but surely not with Julia! Moncrieffe did not see the little by-play that was going on between his wife and youngest daughter all this while. It is needless to say that Constance *had* endeavoured eagerly to cultivate the friendship of her youngest step-child; but somehow she never seemed to make any progress with her. Julia was always sweet, but never responsive; and she resisted all her step-mother's advances, with an invisible shield of swan's-down, which was as impenetrable as it was apparently soft and yielding. When Constance tried to talk to her, the girl would regard her with a sweet, vacant smile, but without making much response; and on the first opportunity would turn from her to speak with someone else. Constance felt herself completely baffled by Julia; but, of

course, her husband could not appreciate her difficulty, and he felt rather impatient with her for not taking more readily to the girl; and Constanee, seeing that he did not sympathise with her, could not explain her perplexity to him. She did not wish to run the chance of being accused of talking *unjust nonsense* a second time.

She was glad when at length their week at Brighton drew to a close, and the time came for them to start for the Continent. She hoped that the girls would be more drawn towards her, when they found themselves really under her wing; and she fancied that the enjoyment of travelling would restore their good temper. But here she counted without her host. It was the end of November when they left Brighton, and the two girls were disappointed at having to leave just as the Christmas gaieties were so near. Harry's seventeenth birth-day was early in December, and the Fortescues had issued invitations for a dance in celebration of it. Of course they knew that the Moncrieffes intended to be abroad by that time, but they fancied that they would consent to defer their departure from Brighton for a short time, in order to enable Harry to be present at her own dance. They gave a good many dances in the course of the year, and it made very little difference to them whether they gave their Christmas dance now or later; but they laid great stress

on the fact of this being "Harry's" dance, and did all they could to get the Moncrieffes to wait for it.

Constance, though she was sighing to get away, was quite ready to yield to their request; but Moncrieffe was obdurate, and insisted on leaving at the end of the first week. He wanted to get the girls away from the place as soon as possible. He had only been in the habit of paying passing visits to the Fortescues hitherto, and had never perceived how injudiciously they were bringing up his children, until within the last year or so. Since his eyes had been opened to the fact, he had become more and more convinced of it, and had sought to remedy the evil by marrying the first suitable person he came across. He had fancied that a young person, who was old enough to be steady, yet young enough to enter into his girls' amusements, would be the best mother to give them; but now a faint doubt began to stir in his heart, whether an older woman would not have understood how to manage two big girls better than a young thing like Constance. But he did his best to stifle the feeling, telling himself that if he had made a mistake it was nobody's fault but his own, and that Constance was very good and patient with Harry, though she did not do justice to Julia. Having a wife to take charge of his girls, he was determined to get them away from Brighton with as little delay as

possible; nor did he choose to put himself under any great obligation to the Fortescues by paying them a lengthened visit now. So he carried his wife and daughters off at the day originally fixed for their departure, and the latter laid their disappointment down to Constance's account.

"It's all very well for her to say she is willing to stay here," sobbed Julia spitefully, "but I'm certain it's *she* who has got papa to take us away."

"I wish she'd be honest and say what she means," rejoined Harry scornfully.

And with these feelings the girls were naturally unwilling to show that they took any pleasure in anything out of Brighton. They went first to Paris, where they were to spend two or three weeks, and where the shops were already beginning to brighten in anticipation of Christmas and the New Year. The girls could not deny that it was pleasant to spend money here, and they admitted that the theatres (to one or two of which Moncrieffe took them) were very amusing. But they sighed piteously as each fresh letter from Brighton brought news of more "fun" there. They did not care for ordinary sight-seeing, and yawned disconsolately as they tramped through the Louvre, with only their father and his wife as companions. If they could have had some of their young Brighton friends with them, this sort of thing would not have been

"half bad," they decided; but with only papa and Constance (Harry had consented to call her step-mother by her Christian name) to talk to, it was "most awfully slow."

Julia did her best to conceal from her father how dull she often was with him, for though she was not as warm-hearted as Harry, she was really fond of him, and did not wish to hurt his feelings; but she made no secret of her *ennui* with Constance; while Harry did nothing but grumble openly at everything.

Things were not quite so bad during the first week, when everything was new to the girls; but after that even the shops lost half their attraction, for word came that this was to be an unusually gay Christmas at Brighton, and when Harry's birthday dawned, about a week after their arrival in Paris, she and Julia looked particularly woebegone, for they were both thinking of the dance at the Fortescues. Their father, who quite understood that this would be a dull day for them, had promised to take them to the theatre in the evening, and in the morning they were all to ride over to Fontainbleau and lunch there. Constance, who was a timid horsewoman, never having had much practice since her father's death, would infinitely have preferred driving; but when her husband replied with a disappointed air (though he professed himself ready to yield to her wishes), that he feared the girls would not care for driving, she gave up the point,

since it was Harry's birthday, and the object of the excursion was to please her and her sister.

When Harry made her appearance in their *salon* that morning, she was met by her father, who embraced her fondly, and clasped on her arm a handsome gold bracelet, studded with rubies, as a birthday gift. Harry had never had such a handsome trinket in her life, for her father had not intended to give her and Julia their mother's jewels till they came out, and had only given them small presents hitherto, such as he considered fit for school-girls to wear. But Harry was out now, and he wished to atone to her for the disappointment of missing her birthday party.

"Oh, papa, how awfully jolly of you!" she cried, and kissed him heartily. "It is the loveliest bracelet I ever saw," she added, turning it round on her arm with the air of a connoisseur, though in truth her acquaintance with handsome jewellery was limited.

"I am glad you like it, dear," replied Moncrieffe. "Constance helped me to choose it," he added, for since Harry obstinately refused to call the new Mrs Moncrieffe "mamma," Constance herself had induced her husband to allow the girls to make use of her christian name. Harry's brow clouded at this announcement, and she regarded the bracelet with less satisfaction than at first. Then Julia, who had been standing by, watching the bracelet

with envious eyes, stepped forward to present her present—a fan, but not a particularly pretty one, for Julia was not fond of spending her money on presents for other people. Harry, however, received the offering as warmly as she had done the bracelet, and expressed herself much pleased with it; and Julia dimpled prettily, and accepted her thanks graciously, as was her wont.

Then Constance, who was later than usual this morning, came in, and going up to Harry, who was seated by the table, she bent over her and kissed her, wishing her many happy returns of the day, before the girl was aware of her intention. It was the first time she had ever ventured to kiss her, and Harry started back as if she had been stung, and then flushed hotly as she saw her step-mother holding a pretty turquoise ring towards her. For a minute she hesitated, longing to refuse it point blank; but as she dared not do this with her father in the room, she accepted it with a cold "Thank you—you are very kind;" the last words being uttered after a half pause, and with a perceptible effort.

"Won't you put it on and wear it, dear?" asked Constance gently.

"No," replied Harry curtly, and laid the ring carelessly on the table by her side, without deigning to bestow another glance upon it, while her step-mother flushed in her turn, and moved away in silence.

Moncrieffe knew that it would only make bad worse if he attempted to reprove Harry publicly for her ungraciousness, but he felt bound to support his young wife, and was preparing reluctantly to bring Harry to task, when Constance silenced him with a slight movement of her hand. He thanked her with a look, and for several minutes after Harry's brief "No," perfect silence reigned over the little party; but they all seemed to hear the echo of that "*no*" vibrating through the stillness, and Harry herself grew rather uncomfortable, and glanced awkwardly from her father's annoyed face to Constance's flushed one. Then she saw that Julia was trying not to laugh, and immediately her pride caught fire, and she began to whistle softly to herself, to show them that "she did not care," as she phrased it.

Soon after breakfast they set out on their ride. Harry and Julia were devoted to the exercise, and looked very well in their habits; but Constance was nervous, though she did not like to admit the fact, and her habit, which had been made by a second-rate tailor, when she was sixteen, had grown uncomfortably tight—though she was certainly not stout even now. As she came into the room where Harry and Julia were standing ready dressed by the window, inspecting the horses in the court-yard below, she could not help seeing that her habit appeared doubly shabby

and ill-made by the side of their perfect turn-outs, and she coloured a little as she felt her husband's eyes regarding her with quiet dissatisfaction.

"Why, mamma, you look just like a skewered hen," cried Julia, with a little burst of childish laughter. "What a very funny habit! Where did you get it?"

"It is too small for me," replied Constance with a rather uncomfortable laugh. "It was made when I was only sixteen."

"You must get another," said Moncrieffe decisively. "Now if you are all ready we had better go down."

They all went downstairs, and mounted, the girls having chosen their horses as they stood by the window of their *salon*, waiting for Constance. Their father had mounted Harry, and was preparing to mount his wife, when Julia rushed forward, exclaiming:

"Oh, not that horse, Constance; that is the one I chose!"

Constance had chosen it because it seemed the quietest: Julia wanted it because it was the prettiest.

"Do you mind?" asked Moncrieffe of his wife, evidently hoping she would humour the child; and of course Constance had to mount on the third horse, which was a dirty white, and appeared rather fidgety. She looked better, once she was in the saddle, than she had done while standing, and Harry remarked patronisingly,—

"Your habit does well enough after all. The skirt's better than the body."

"I warned you I shouldn't look fit to be seen in it," replied Constance, wishing devoutly that her servant at home (as she still called her mother's house) had not been so stupid as to pack it among her trousseau. Julia had spied it out at the bottom of one of her boxes, and had insisted that she should wear it for this once, even if it did not fit her well. Indeed, Miss Julia had rather enjoyed the idea of seeing her step-mother looking a guy, and had pressed her point all the more in consequence; and rather than spoil the party, Constance had consented. Now Julia was rather disappointed to see how little of a *guy* her step-mother looked, considering the quality of her habit.

"Let me ride beside *you*, papa darling," she said, coaxingly, and Moncrieffe had not the heart to refuse, though perhaps it would have seemed more natural for him to ride with his bride.

"Who will ride with me?" he said aloud. "We cannot all ride abreast."

"Oh, do let me," cried Julia, and with a "very well then," her father rode out through the *porte-cochère* by her side, leaving Harry and Constance to follow together. On their return journey it was the same thing; Julia insisted on keeping by her father's side, and he was evidently well pleased to have her by him, though he again made a feint of offering to escort the other two.

"It is the best thing we can do, to throw those two together," said Julia, confidentially, to her father, as they were starting back to Paris. "They *must* talk if they are alone together."

At which Moncrieffe laughed, amused by her little air of wisdom.

In point of fact, however, Harry and her step-mother were not having a very lively time of it. Harry was cross, and Constance was thoughtful and pre-occupied. Each day served to impress upon her more and more clearly that her marriage had been a great mistake. Not that she admitted this to herself in so many words, but she felt it distinctly in her innermost heart. It was clear to her that she was *de trop* in the Moncrieffe family circle—*in*, did I say? nay, she had never been admitted into the charmed circle. She was an outsider, a stranger, an intruder, yet she was powerless to withdraw her unwelcome presence from the family group. If she had felt nervous with her husband during their first week in London, she felt still more so now, with his girls watching each word she spoke to him, and he each she exchanged with them. And it seemed to her too as if these girls, for whose sake Bruce had married, stood between her and him like a barrier. One or other of them was for ever claiming his attention, and at times it almost seemed to the young wife that their object was to keep him away from her side as much as

possible. Julia was doubly sweet to him if he seemed disposed to talk to his wife, and would thrust herself between them, and drag him away in the most barefaced manner; and even Harry tried to exclude her step-mother from any share in the lively conversations which they carried on with their father. It was a little excitement to the girls to see who could monopolise the most of Moncrieffe's attention; had there been other men for them to flirt with, no doubt they would not have been so assiduous in their attentions to him; but *faute de mieux*, it was rather amusing trying to out-rival Constance with him, and the poor man was quite delighted with his girls' sweetness to himself, though he wished Harry had been kinder to Constance.

Constance used often to sit and watch them, as they sat round the fire in the evenings, all so thoroughly happy together—and without her. Of what use was she here? she asked herself bitterly. She could never influence the girls as Bruce had hoped she would. They would be infinitely happier without her; and he quite as happy. Bruce himself was not to blame for this state of affairs, she was aware. He tried, as much as in him lay, to be good to her, and to draw her and his girls together; but he was so much fonder of the girls than he was of her, and enjoyed their companionship so much more than hers! *They* were not in awe of him, as his young wife was; and they

laughed at, and joked with him, and ordered him about in a way that Constance would never have ventured to do, and which he would probably have resented if she had.

To-day she saw that he was very glad to be riding with Julia rather than with her, though he had offered to accompany her from a sense of duty, just as he had given her her choice of the horses. But she knew that he would have been annoyed if she had taken the horse Julia wanted, and that he would have been disappointed if she had accepted his offer to ride with her.

"If I could only relieve them of my company altogether, I am sure I should be very thankful to do so," she thought, despondingly, and heaved an unconsciously heavy sigh.

Harry, who had been watching her father and Julia with wrathful eyes, was attracted by the sigh, and turned a curious glance upon her step-mother, who was gazing dreamily over her horse's head, with a weary expression on her face that considerably surprised Harry. Was she tired? she wondered for a minute; but then it was borne in upon her mind that Constance was sad rather than tired. She was watching the pair in front with a wistful expression, that made Harry fancy she must be jealous of her husband's affection for his daughters.

Harry was very angry herself with Julia at this minute. It was odiously selfish of her

sister to insist on riding both ways with her father, she thought. One way was fair enough; but she ought to have allowed her (Harry) to ride home with him—for it never occurred to Harry that her father ought to ride with his wife. Of course, Julia was papa's favourite; Harry knew this, and Julia had frequently flung the fact in her teeth. If *she* had been the favourite, Harry thought, *she* would not have taunted Julia with it. It was a horribly mean thing to do, and as has been already said, meanness was the one unpardonable offence in Harry's eyes. But hitherto it had never occurred to her that her step-mother might be jealous of Julia's influence with Moncrieffe. Harry would not allow to herself that *she* was jealous of her sister—she would have considered it mean; but she was not quite certain whether to sympathise with, or condemn her step-mother. She had rather a fellow-feeling for her in some respects, but then she considered that step-mothers are the natural enemies of step-children, and that they always try to come between them and their fathers. If Constance wished to get between papa and them (Harry and Julia), she would find herself rather "out of it," Harry decided. She glanced at her step-mother again, expecting to see an expression of disappointed malice on her face; but there was only a sad, dispirited look there, and a dreamy light in the large violet eyes, as if Constance's mind

had wandered far away from her uncongenial surroundings. Harry said nothing to her, but she kept looking at her every now and then, and gradually a wonder began to rise in her heart whether Constance could possibly be unhappy among them. It seemed natural to her that step-mothers should make their husband's children unhappy; but that the children should have equal power over the step-mother, had never occurred to her before, and now that the idea had faintly dawned upon her mind, she did her best to banish and stifle it, for it was not a very agreeable one to her.

CHAPTER VII.

SWEET BELLS JANGLED.

THE day had been bright and sunny, but bitterly cold, as it often is in Paris; and when the riding party reached home, Constance's head was aching so badly from the combined effects of cold and fatigue, that she had to retire to her bed, and allow her husband and his daughters to go to the *table-d'hôte*, and afterwards the theatre, without her. They would not miss her, she reflected bitterly; and, indeed, they were rather relieved by her absence. Julia expressed her belief, to her father and sister, that Constance was only cross about something, and not ill a bit; but Moncrieffe reprimanded her sharply for speaking in such a manner of her mother; and even Harry declared stoutly that Constance had looked terribly ill during their homeward ride, and that she was certainly not shamming.

"The ride has been too much for her," added Harry; "she isn't accustomed to it."

"No, indeed," chimed Julia softly. "She didn't know how to manage her horse a bit. I thought she would certainly tumble off every minute. I never saw such a guy in my life!" and she laughed softly.

"She's nothing of the sort," retorted Harry shortly.

She was always irritated beyond endurance by her sister's manner, and her love of justice was roused by Julia's words. Whatever Constance was, she was pretty and graceful: that much Harry confessed reluctantly.

"What a funny girl you are Harry," said Julia, raising her eyebrows plaintively.

"At any rate I'm not a horrid little humbug like you!" retorted Harry furiously; and it took Moncrieffe all he knew to prevent the war of words going further.

After this Harry was considerably exercised in her mind about her step-mother. She could not quite make her out. She seemed perfectly harmless; but when Harry remarked this to Julia, the other told her to "wait and see."

"She'll show herself in her true colours as soon as she has the opportunity, you'll see," said Julia sagely. "She's had no chance yet."

Harry often quarrelled with her sister, but she harkened to her voice now. She was too proud to be willing to admit that she had been in the wrong all along, and her step-mother in

the right, and she felt inclined to agree with Julia's suspicions. And soon these suspicions were confirmed, for a letter came to Julia from Archie Bird, and Constance felt herself bound to inform her husband, who summarily forbid Julia to have anything further to say to young Bird, and also wrote to the young man himself, saying that he thought his correspondence with his daughter had better come to an end.

Great was Julia's wrath, and Harry sympathised eagerly with her, and quite agreed that it was all Constance's fault. Papa would have known nothing about that letter if Constance had not told him of it; and no doubt it was she who had egged him on to interfere as he had done—for he would never have been so unkind of his own accord, they declared.

"It is just like Carry's case over again," said Julia, quite forgetting that she was not really in love with Archie, and that her heart was not broken, as Carry Day always affirmed that her's was. She tried to appear very melancholy and woe-begone for several days however, and confided to Harry that she had never known until now how much she really liked poor Archie; and Harry listened with fierce sympathy, and thought all the worse of her step-mother, because she was so deceitfully sweet and hypocritical. For weeks after this affair of young Bird, neither of the girls ever spoke to Constance if they could possibly help it. Harry was openly defiant, and often

rude; and Julia was quietly antagonistic, though she tried to hide this from her father, knowing that to behave badly to Constance before him, would be like playing into Constance's hands.

As for Constance, she did what she could to soften their wrath against herself, but this was no easy task; they were often dull, and consequently cross, and disposed to quarrel with each other, and with her.

"I wonder how papa could have thought of coming abroad for the whole winter," grumbled Harry. "It's awfully stupid, not knowing a soul to speak to."

She grumbled still more when a wet day confined them indoors from morning to night, and when the second day turned out equally wet, she grew desperate, and after luncheon expressed her intention of going out to a neighbouring shop, to purchase some Christmas cards to send to her friends in Brighton.

"I shall get wet, of course," she said, "but I really can't stay indoors another day."

"I'm afraid you will catch cold," remonstrated Constance mildly; but her stepmother's warning made Harry all the more determined to take her own way, and she walked to the door of the *salon* in silence, not deigning to reply.

"I'll come with you," cried Julia, starting up.

"My dears, don't you think you are foolish?" again said Constance. "It is not fit weather

to go out, really; and it will be hard on Wilson (Wilson was their maid) having to accompany you."

"She needn't come," said Harry curtly. "We two can go perfectly well by ourselves."

"Indeed you cannot, my dear," said Constance firmly. "Such a thing would be impossible in Paris."

"I thought you had never been in Paris before," laughed Julia saucily.

"But I know that it is not proper for ladies to walk by themselves here—nor in London either."

"What do *you* know about it?" asked Harry scornfully, with a toss of her handsome head. "I've often been in London with my aunts, and they think nothing of walking alone there."

"Perhaps they did not know many people there. But certainly it would not do for a Miss Moncrieffe to go out alone—or with only her young sister."

"Oh, you needn't give yourself such fine airs," retorted Harry insolently, with a curl of her lip. "Who are *you*, that you should set up to know better than us? You were only a *companion* before papa married you, and I don't see how you are to know more about society than we do."

Constance flushed up at this rude address, and Julia tittered openly, which did not tend to soothe her step-mother's feelings. The

latter, however, attempted no reply, but quietly touching the bell beside her, to summon Wilson, leant back in her seat, and resumed her embroidery, while Harry, seeing that her opponent did not mean fight, retired from the room, to prepare for her walk, followed by the still tittering Julia.

"Well, you *did* give it her well, and no mistake," said the younger sister, as she closed the *salon* door.

"Yes, I fancy she won't be in such a hurry to interfere with me again," replied Harry scornfully.

But when she and Julia were equipped for their outing, they found Wilson waiting ready dressed to accompany them, and had to submit to be followed by her, whether they would or no. In their vexation, they led the poor woman a dance half over Paris, in the pouring rain, heedless of getting wet themselves, provided they could punish her for having presumed to obey Mrs Moncrieffe's orders, and follow them.

"If Constance had allowed us to come out by ourselves, of course we should only have gone to the Christmas card shop," said Harry. "But since Wilson is with us, we can go where we like."

So they tramped about, rather enjoying the rain than otherwise, since they "had nothing on to spoil," as they said; but at last they made their way back to their hotel, feeling

that they had stayed out quite long enough to show Mrs Moncrieffe that they had no respect for her authority. As they were entering the court-yard of the hotel, they met a gentleman coming out of it, wrapped in a Mackintosh, and grasping a huge umbrella. He paused as he came in front of the Moncrieffes, and raising his hat politely, disclosed a dark, handsome face, which Julia instantly recognised as that of the gentleman who had sat next her at the *table-d'hôte* the two last evenings, and who had made himself so agreeable to her. She smiled, and blushed up, as she returned his salute, and perceived that he meant to address her.

"Pray excuse me," he began, courteously, "but am I right in supposing that I have the honour of addressing Miss Moncrieffe?"

"I am Miss Moncrieffe," simpered Julia, immensely gratified that he should have taken the trouble to find out her name. Surely she must have made a conquest of him!

"Then may I introduce myself to you as Edgar Day? It seems absurd of me not to know my sisters' greatest friends," and he bowed to Harry to show that he included her in his speech.

"Oh, are you Carry's brother that she has so often told me about?" cried Harry, extending her hand eagerly. "Oh, I'm awfully glad to see you at last! Won't you come up to our rooms?"

They had been standing under the arch of the *porte-cochère* during this brief scene, but on Mr Day's accepting Harry's offer, they made their way across the court to the hotel door, and the lift being engaged at this moment, Harry ran lightly upstairs to the first flat where their apartments were.

"How did you know us?" she asked, turning to Mr Day, who was following by Julia's side.

"I chanced to hear the waiter call your father Mr Moncrieffe, and I at once guessed who you were—my sisters have described you so often in their letters to me," he replied, with a smile that showed his fine teeth.

In point of fact he had received a letter from Carry that morning telling him that the Moncrieffes were at his hotel, and advising him to try and make friends with them, as each of the girls had two thousand a-year of their own, and had expectations as well from a rich aunt of their mother's; but Mr Day fancied that the girls would be better pleased if he pretended to have recognised them himself. His sisters were always looking out for heiresses for him, whom, as a rule, he made a point of eschewing; but the Moncrieffes were of such unexceptional family and position, that Mr Day was disposed to make an exception in their favour. Besides, he really admired Harry; she was not remarkably handsome, but she had such a fine figure, and such a magnificent way of carrying her head. She looked like a young princess, he

thought, and he determined that this was the sister for him. It did not occur to him that if he really chose to take the trouble to woo any girl, he should fail to win her. He knew he was handsome, and that his manner to women was agreeable, and here were two silly school-girls who would accept his attentions with avidity. Of course he could have either of them he chose—if the parents did not come in the way. Constance was working by the fire when Harry burst open the *salon* door, and led the way into the room, exclaiming,—

"Here are three drowned rats! Constance, this is Mr Day, Carry's brother, you know." She was in a good temper, and spoke less formally than usual to her step-mother. But as soon as the introduction was accomplished, she turned her back on Constance, and devoted herself pointedly to the new-comer. This she did, more because she was so anxious to be friendly to Carry's brother, than from a wish to slight her step-mother; but Constance and Mr Day both ascribed her conduct to the latter cause.

Constance did not like Mr Day's appearance, principally because he bore such a strong resemblance to his elder sister, no doubt, though Carry was almost plain, and her brother decidedly handsome. But he had Carry's soft, purring, insincere manner, and there was a want of openness and honesty about his face.

"Don't you think you had better change your wet things, my dears?" suggested Constance, at last. She had refrained from making the remark as long as possible, knowing that it would probably make the girls all the more determined not to do what she said; but now she saw Julia shivering, and felt that she must speak.

"I shall not," said Harry flatly; but Julia, who was sulky because her sister was monopolising all the conversation, rose and left the room in silence.

"Wouldn't you like some hot tea or coffee?" asked Harry of the guest, and as she spoke she gave a little shiver herself. But Mr Day felt that the offer should have come from Mrs Moncrieffe, and was declining, when Harry jumped up and rang the bell, saying that she must have some tea at any rate.

When the servant came in answer to the summons, she ordered the tea without a look at her step-mother, and when it came, she poured it out, and insisted on Mr Day's taking a cup whether he would or no. That gentleman indeed found himself in rather a difficult position; he understood that if he wished to gain a footing in the family, he must stand well with both Mr and Mrs Moncrieffe—or at any rate with one of the two, and he would fain have conciliated the latter now; but whenever he attempted to draw Constance into the conversation, he failed ignominiously.

Constance, it is true, would willingly have followed Harry's lead in the talk, but the latter refused resolutely either to lead or to follow. Whenever Constance put in her word, Harry changed the subject so abruptly that Mr Day had no chance of making any reply to his hostess. Harry's voice was the loudest and her manner the most imperious, and before Constance had well finished speaking, she would start off on some other subject, and compel Mr Day to follow her. What could he do? Above all, he must stand well with the daughter; so he gave up trying to be polite to Mrs Moncrieffe, and consoled himself with the reflection that she could have very little influence over her step-daughters. He lingered on till Julia reappeared in dry garments, and after a few remarks to her, finally took his departure.

Then Harry retired to her own room, cold and shivering, to remove her wet things; but when she returned to the *salon*, she was still shivering, and soon she was obliged to confess that she must have caught a severe cold. Julia thought this was a judgment on her sister for having flirted so openly with Mr Day, and giving no one else a chance of saying a word to him, and she hoped that when papa came home he would be properly displeased with Harry for having sat such a long time in her wet things.

The first thing Moncrieffe heard, when by-

and-by he came in, was Harry sneezing, and he instantly inquired whether she had got cold.

"Yes, I suppose I have," replied Harry defiantly. She glanced at her step-mother, expecting to hear her say,—"Yes, Harry would insist on going out in the rain, and was most insolent to me when I tried to prevent her." But Constance held her peace, and so Harry added herself, "I went out to some shops—"

"Out! in this weather?" said Moncrieffe, in an annoyed tone. "How could you let her go, Constance?" he added to his wife, who glanced at him with a little expressive gesture of helplessness.

"How was she to prevent me?" asked Harry haughtily. "She did try, so you needn't look at her like that."

"At least I hope you didn't insist on going alone," demanded Moncrieffe severely.

"Oh, no, Constance sent Wilson with us," said Harry, who always spoke the truth.

"And she did not like going at all, poor thing," laughed Julia airily. "Harry was so angry with her for following her, that she led her a dance half over the town."

Harry glanced scornfully at her sister, who had taken good care not to let her father guess that she too had been out in the rain, and had helped to drag poor Wilson hither and thither in the wet. For a minute it was on the tip of Harry's tongue to remark that Julia had been

her fellow-sinner, but this would have been *mean*, so she contented herself with one look of supreme contempt at her sister, who returned it with one of utter innocence.

"But I don't think it was only the rain that gave Harry cold," proceeded Julia calmly. "It was sitting in her wet things after she came in, talking to Mr Day."

"Mr Day?"

"Yes, Carry and Netta's brother, you know. Harry sat and talked to him for an hour in her wet things, though Constance told her to go and change them."

"And why didn't you do so, foolish child?" said Moncrieffe, shaking his head.

"It wasn't *her* business," retorted Harry defiantly.

"It *was* her business!" exclaimed the father angrily. "It is her business to take care of you; and yours to obey her."

"I shall not obey her anyway," returned Harry indomitably.

"I am very much disappointed in you, Harry," said Moncrieffe coldly. "I thought you were too just and honourable to behave in this way to a person who never has harmed you. Constance has borne with all your tempers with marvellous patience and goodness, and this is the return you make her. I can only repeat that I am very much disappointed in you."

Then he sat down and read the *Times*, and

an uncomfortable silence reigned throughout the room. Harry was conscious of an uncomfortable choking in her throat, and a hot feeling behind her eyes; but she was too proud to let anyone see how deeply her father's words had hurt her, so sat by the fire, with her fine head well thrown up, and her lips firmly closed.

Constance glanced nervously at her once or twice, but did not venture to address her, and at last Harry left the room, shutting the door after her with a bang that made them all start in their chairs. With a muttered exclamation of anger, Moncrieffe sprang from his chair, and striding to the door, shouted to Harry to come back.

"What is it?" she asked, pausing unwillingly.

"Come here," repeated Moncrieffe, and she turned back into the *salon* sullenly.

"Now, go out and shut the door properly after you," said Moncrieffe sternly; but the girl only stood still, with a dogged expression of resistance on her face.

"Do you hear me?" thundered Moncrieffe, and Constance trembled to see how dreadful he looked in his anger. But Harry faced him unflinchingly, and remarked coolly,—

"Yes, I hear you."

"Then do you intend to do as I tell you?"

"No," returned the girl boldly.

But Constance could stand no more of this sort of thing, and rising, she went hastily ove

to the door, and standing with the handle in her hand, said, quietly,—

"I am going to my room. Come with me Harry."

"No, I will shut the door myself," said Harry ungraciously, preferring, of two evils, to obey her father rather than put herself under any obligation to her step-mother.

So Constance went quietly away to her own room, while Harry marched out of the *salon* after her, shutting the door with preternatural softness. She shut herself into her own room for the rest of the day, and could not prevent herself crying a little when she found herself alone. It was very cold here, but by-and-by a servant came in and lighted the fire, and Harry could not help feeling thankful for the warmth, though she knew Constance must have ordered the fire. A little before dinner time Constance came in, to inquire whether her cold was too bad to allow her to come down to the *table-d'hôte*.

The room was dark, save for the fire light, but a bright flame sprang up as Constance entered, and revealed to her the fact that Harry's eyes were red with weeping.

"I daresay you would like to have your dinner sent up to you?" she said, kindly. "You might get fresh cold if you went downstairs."

"No, I won't go down," returned Harry sulkily.

"I hope you don't bear malice, Harry, for what has happened to-day?" said the step-mother, laying her hand gently on Harry's shoulder; but the girl shook off her touch roughly, and bid her "mind her own business!" in no very amiable tone.

"As you will," said Constance, exasperated beyond endurance by the girl's rudeness. "But remember it is your own fault entirely if we are not friends. *I* have never done anything to merit your enmity."

Then she left the room in high dudgeon, and going to her own, where Moncrieffe was waiting for her, informed him that Harry wished to have her dinner in her own room.

"And she is as cross as she can possibly be," she added, still feeling ruffled at the remembrance of the girl's looks and words. "I tried to speak kindly to her, and she snapped at me in return, and told me to *mind my own business!*"

Moncrieffe sighed; he was fond of Harry, and could not bear to quarrel with her.

"My poor girl," he said, compassionately, putting his arm round his wife's shoulders (a most unusual proceeding for him), I am afraid you will have a rough time of it with that foolish girl at first. I did not know what I was asking you to undertake, when I asked you to be my wife."

"It is a pity you did so, perhaps, as things have turned out," she suggested quietly, but

with a touch of suppressed bitterness in her voice.

She had looked eagerly into his face when he first put his arm round her, and spoke kindly to her; but there had been no love in his eyes as he returned her gaze; only kindly commiseration, tinged with regret—that he had married her probably, she thought to herself indignantly, and unconsciously some of her feeling betrayed itself in her voice. But Moncrieffe did not notice this; he only sighed deeply, in a way that showed he too thought it was rather a pity he had ever asked her to be his wife. Perhaps he thought this as much on her account as his own, but Constance was already irritated, and did not pause to analyse his feelings.

"Yes, it was certainly an unfortunate thing for you," she said, drawing herself away from him, and replying to his sigh. "You married me to keep your girls in order; to be a kind of finishing governess to them in fact; and now they decline to be kept in order by me, and all I have done is to bring discord into the family. Oh! I have been a bad speculation altogether," and she laughed a dry, unnatural laugh, that grated harshly on her husband's ears.

"My dear, I don't think you quite know what you are saying," he said, in a grave, shocked tone.

"Oh yes, I do," she replied defiantly.

"Can you deny the truth of what I say?" she cried, turning almost fiercely upon him, and tapping the ground impatiently with her foot. "Can you deny that you married me without feeling one spark of affection for me, solely that your girls might be taken away from the Fortescues? You did not trouble yourself to think of *me*, or consider what my feelings would be when I found out the truth—that I was no more than a head servant in your house. I was poor, and it was a grand thing for me to marry Moncrieffe of Moncrieffe, and I could have no reason to complain if everything was not exactly to my taste in my new home. Oh! how I wish I could get back to my old one! I would not be in a hurry to leave it again!"

Moncrieffe had stood silently staring at her during this brief explosion of anger, too taken aback by her unusual vehemence to attempt to stem the torrent of her wrath. He had never seen his wife anything but sweet and gentle, and now he hardly recognised her, as she stood confronting him, with her beautiful figure drawn up to an unnatural height, and her deep violet eyes distended, and looking almost black with excitement. During the first part of her speech he had felt guilty and uncomfortable, and for the first time it occurred to him that he had not dealt quite fairly by his wife; at least he ought to have made her understand what she was undertak-

ing before marrying her. But her last words roused his indignation, and instead of trying to soothe her, and argue away her suspicions, as he would otherwise have done, he replied, stiffly,—

"I am sorry you already regret having married me; but since we cannot undo the past, we had better make the best of the future. It wants only twenty minutes to dinner time—I will leave you to prepare for it."

Then he walked firmly out of the room, leaving Constance gazing after him, feeling as if she had been struck to stone.

"Cruel! unfeeling! heartless!" she murmured passionately, as the door closed upon him. She did not recognise herself in the bitter, angry woman who stood there, clenching her little hands together till it seemed as if she would break the fingers off, so vehement was her pressure. All the sweetness seemed to be burnt out of her by the fierce, oppressing sense of wrong which overpowered her. Her brain was boiling; and her heart cold as ice; it seemed as though some cold, death's hand had grasped the latter, and was killing and blighting all the love that had ever dwelt in it for her husband. At that minute she almost felt as if she hated him, and she wished he had still been there, so that she might have told him this. She had borne her burden for six whole weeks without an

open murmur, hoping against hope that the girls would cease to hate her, and their father come to love her; but now all such hope had been roughly dispelled; the girls would never cease to be her enemies, and Bruce had not attempted to deny her charge of indifference; and the misery of her position seemed to rush upon her with maddening force. If only Bruce had shown *some* feeling—even anger, she could have borne it better, she thought; but it was his stony indifference that lashed her into fresh rage whenever she thought of it. He had not attempted to refute her charges; he had accepted them coolly and without anger or pain. It had only been those last words of hers, about wishing herself back at her old home, that had offended him. Her dear old home! tears rose to her eyes, and quenched the fire in them, as she thought of it. But she dared not let them fall; and just then Wilson came in to arrange her hair for dinner, and she had to put on the conventional mask and try to appear as though nothing were amiss, while the maid discoursed grumblingly about the "tramp" that the young ladies had led her to-day, and which had spoiled her black gown, which was quite new too, and had been much admired, as it was of a most elegant make, etc., etc.

CHAPTER VIII.

EDGAR DAY.

WHILE Wilson brushed her mistress's hair, and grumbled, Constance had time to grow a little cooler, if not for much reflection. Her first passion wore itself out, and in its place came a numb, lethargic feeling, like a thick veil over the slumbering pain in her heart. She was so unaccustomed to fly into passions, that now she felt worn out and weary, and a faint suspicion that she had been foolish and hasty began to grow within her.

When we lose our tempers and say rude things, we put ourselves in the wrong, even though we may originally have been the aggrieved party; and Constance felt that she had placed herself in a false position by telling her husband that she wished herself back with her mother—or, in other words, expressed her regret at having married him.

Naturally he had been offended; but when Constance thought of his coldness she could not forgive him. She thought she could have borne so better if he had grown excited and angry like herself: but he had shown plainly that he was utterly without feeling where she was concerned. Still she began to wish vaguely that she had not quarrelled with him. What would be the good of it? Her heart felt chill and dead, as if blasted by a sudden stroke of lightning, and all the passion had died out of it now. She felt that she could never care for her husband again as she had done once: but family quarrels were miserable things, and surely it would be better to live at peace with him. And after all, if she could cure herself of caring for him, it wouldn't matter much whether he cared for her or not!

With slow, languid steps she went down the corridor to the salon, the door of which had slipped slightly ajar, so that she could hear her husband's voice within, speaking to some one — probably Julia. Yes, there was Julia's voice, clear and distinct, saying,—

"No, I do not like Constance at all, but I will try to be nice to her for *your* sake, darling papa."

Constance entered the room almost before the sentence was concluded, and the sight of [illegible] embracing his daughter was

not exactly balm to her wounded feelings. So! he kissed Julia for saying that she disliked her, his wife, thought Constance indignantly, and the tears welled into her eyes as she reflected how impossible it would be for her ever to live at peace with her husband, if these girls made mischief like this.

The father and daughter had started guiltily when they found that Constance was actually standing in the room with them. The door must have been open (else they would surely have heard her turn the handle), and she had probably heard Julia's entire speech.

They exchanged hasty glances of dismay, and Bruce bit his lip and frowned heavily, as he saw his wife's lip quiver, and the tears mount to her violet eyes. He was sincerely sorry for her, and would have given a great deal to have undone what had just happened; but he could think of nothing to say, and Julia sat silent too, looking very demure, and rather enjoying the situation.

Constance walked up to the fire, and stood pretending to warm her feet, with her back carefully turned to the other two, and when, after several minutes, she turned and broke the silence by suggesting that they should go down to dinner, no trace of emotion was visible on her face. On the contrary, she appeared supremely cold and collected, though in truth it was only the mighty struggle she

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was going through to repress her tears, that made her manner appear strained and unnatural.

She walked downstairs before the others, with the dignity of a young queen, and seated herself at table beside Mr Day, to whom she talked gaily throughout the long meal, carefully refraining from turning her head towards her husband or Julia on her other side.

Hitherto Julia had always had the seat next Mr Day, and she supposed that it was a piece of pure ill-nature on Constance's part to take it to-night. She watched her jealously as she laughed and chatted lightly with her handsome neighbour; and Moncrieffe watched her too, vainly trying to understand her sudden animation. There was a bright flush on her cheeks, and an unnatural brilliancy in her eyes, and Julia thought that she was flirting shamefully, and whispered the same to her father, as they were leaving the dining-room. But Moncrieffe stopped her by a dark look which somewhat frightened her. He did not accuse Constance of flirting, in his own mind, but he saw that she was over excited, and would not be a very agreeable companion, so he betook himself off to the smoking-room, and did not go to his own rooms till late at night, when both Constance and Julia had retired to rest, after a very uncomfortable *tête-à-tête* evening.

The next morning, however, things seemed to have dropped back into their usual groove again. Constance looked rather pale and listless certainly, as she poured out the coffee in their little *salon*, where they had their breakfast served; but Moncrieffe looked perfectly calm and unruffled, and Julia as sweet as ever. Only Harry ate her breakfast in solemn silence, for she had not yet got over the disgrace of being publicly scolded by her father. Moncrieffe cast two or three wistful glances at her over the top of his *Times*, and Constance noticed this, and smiled to herself with inward satire. Bruce was plainly miserable, because this naughty girl of his would not look at or speak to him; but much heed he would have paid if it had been his wife who had treated him thus. *She* might have looked as sulky as she pleased, and he would scarcely have noticed the fact; and would certainly not have cared if he had, provided she had not insisted on quarrelling openly with him.

Conversation flagged round the table, which was perhaps only natural, with Harry sitting there looking like a thunder cloud. But still Moncrieffe spoke to Constance now and then much in his usual manner, and she answered him in her customary gentle way, and no one watching them would have guessed at the storm of the

evening before. But the effects remained nevertheless, and would not be undone for many a long day.

Moncrieffe never ceased to think of his wife's angry reproaches, and the more he did so, the more he saw that there had been a great deal of truth in them. Certainly he *had* married principally on his daughters' accounts, but he had never meant Constance to know this, and he felt rather aggrieved at her having proved herself so uncomfortably sharp at discovering the truth. What business had she to find out things that were not intended for her knowledge? Of course this was all very unreasonable, but when people find themselves in awkward positions, they are apt to lay the blame on someone else. And certainly Moncrieffe's position with regard to his womenkind was very uncomfortable. He was in disgrace both with his wife and daughters. Harry would not speak to him, and even Julia had told him plaintively last night, that she thought he had been very unkind to her and Harry when he married again. It had been just after his stormy interview with Constance, and he had joined Julia in the *salon*, intending to ask her to use her influence with Harry to make the latter behave better to her step-mother.

"I will do my best," replied Julia sadly. 'But—but—I am not surprised Harry feels

your marriage so much. I *do* think it was rather unkind of you to marry again, papa, you know. Surely if you were as fond of Harry and me as you say, you would not have wanted a stranger in the family."

All this was said so innocently, that the father had not had it in his heart to be angry.

"It is a good thing for you to have someone to take charge of you, my dear, now you are growing up. And you should try to love your mother. Surely you like her, don't you?"

"No, I don't like Constance at all," replied Julia sadly, "but I will try to be nice to her for your sake, darling papa."

Then she flung her arms round his neck and kissed him, just as Constance pushed open the door and walked in upon them. So Moncrieffe was in hot water on all sides, and being a peace-loving man, the situation irritated him strongly. He was very sorry for his wife, but he thought she was unjust in laying the entire blame on him, for how could he tell before he married her that both the girls would dislike her so much.

He felt very uncomfortable whenever he remembered what she had said about being an upper servant in his house. After all, was it not true that her position was something like this; and had he not regarded her as a sort of "finishing governess" to his girls?

He went about for many days afterwards watching her anxiously, and wishing he could do something to make her happy. Poor girl, her burst of temper had perhaps been natural; and he would think no more of what she had said about wishing herself home again. She was evidently sorry for her outburst, for she grew more patient and forbearing with Harry than ever afterwards, and her manner to himself was always gentle and submissive. But under the gentleness and submission there was a coldness that repelled him, whenever he attempted to approach her.

He was a little bit *gauche* where she was concerned, and after that evening a slight stiffness and consciousness sprang up between them like a barrier. She shrank from him coldly; and he felt awkward with her. She looked listless and unhappy, and he felt that this was a passive reproach to himself. She saw that he was always grave and uneasy when with her, and she often noticed him looking at her in a thoughtful, sorrowful way, when he fancied she was not remarking him, and she understood that he was inclined to be sorry for her. But she was far from understanding how sorry he really was, and the thought of his pity only galled her.

What was the use of his pity to her now? she asked herself bitterly. If he had thought more about her feelings before marriage, it

would have been more to the purpose—*now* it was too late. She was his wife; nothing could alter that fact now, so perhaps she had better try to make the best of the situation. But it was very hard work to make the best of it, with those girls always doing their utmost to make things go wrong.

Constance still strove feebly to do her duty by them, but it was a sore temptation to her to "wash her hands" of them, and leave them to follow their own sweet (?) wills unchecked. But it would have been impossible altogether to do this without openly neglecting her husband's wishes, and angry though she was with him, she did not choose to do this.

During the remaining fortnight which they spent in Paris, she had several disagreements with her step-daughters *àpropos* of Mr Day.

On the day after he had first introduced himself to the Moncrieffes, he called on them again to inquire after Harry's cold, and found only Harry in their *salon*, looking very lonely and dull. The others were all out, and she had been forced to remain in alone, on account of her cold, so Mr Day's visit was a real boon to her. He sat and talked to her for a long time, and only rose to go when he caught sight of the others returning, through the window.

Harry said nothing about his visit to her

father, with whom she was still in high dudgeon; but she mentioned it to Julia, who, in her vexation at the idea of Harry's long *tête-à-tête* with Mr Day, repeated what her sister had told her to Constance.

But the latter took no notice of the information. She had an idea that Bruce disliked Edgar Day, and that he did not consider him at all the sort of person to be admitted into his family on intimate terms; but as her husband had never absolutely said this to her in so many words, she did not feel herself called upon to take any decided step in the matter. She was still feeling chilled and disheartened after what had occurred the previous day, and had not the courage to involve herself in fresh disagreements with her step-daughters, as would assuredly be the case if Bruce ordered her to refuse Mr Day admittance next time he called. So she folded her hands, and let things take their course.

For about a week Harry was confined to the house, and every day, when he had watched the rest of the party safely out of the hotel, Edgar Day used to come and sit with her, and enliven her solitude. She thought this very kind of him, and saw no harm in receiving him alone; but she said nothing about his coming to anyone after the first day, not from a wish to deceive (for, as has been already said, she saw no harm in his coming),

but because she was too angry with her father to confide anything to him, and Julia had been so cross when she heard of Mr Day's first visit, that Harry had taken offence, and did not choose to inform her of his subsequent ones. But at the end of the week, when she was again able to go out, she remarked to Julia, in her step-mother's hearing, that she would quite miss her *tête-à-têtes* with Mr Day; whereupon Julia inquired what she meant, and Harry, whose anger was never of long duration, and who had quite forgiven her sister for her fit of spleen on hearing of Edgar Day's first visit, explained everything to her. Julia's fair face grew pale with anger as she listened, but she said nothing till Constance left the room, when she turned upon her sister and exclaimed, vehemently,—

"Well, of all the deceitful creatures I ever met, you beat them all!"

"What do you mean?" asked Harry sharply, but in considerable surprise.

"As if you didn't know! Why, I call it awfully deceitful to have had Mr Day coming here every day, and never to tell us. But you needn't flatter yourself that you've made a conquest of him. He's a regular Jack of both sides; comes up here and spoons you, and does the same to me at the *table-d'hôte* downstairs, ha! ha!" but there was nothing mirthful in her laugh.

"I never thought I'd made a conquest of him," retorted Harry fiercely, "and it's a shabby thing of you to speak to me like that. But you're always in a way for fear some other girl should be more admired than you are."

"Well, Mr Day won't have a chance of coming here much oftener anyway. You took precious good care of that, when you let out about his visits before Constance. She'll tell papa to a dead certainty, and get him to forbid his coming. She hates all the Days like poison, just because they are our friends."

"Papa doesn't like them much either, I'm afraid."

"He always liked Carry and Netta well enough before; though of course he did not know much of them. But it's Constance who has set him dead against them."

And as it happened, their fears were verified. Constance was greatly dismayed when she found that Mr Day had been in the habit of seeing Harry alone every day that week; and saw now that she had done wrong in not telling her husband of his first visit. She lost no time in informing him how things stood now, and, as she had anticipated, he was vexed with her for not having let him know of Mr Day's first visit immediately.

"The Days are not at all desirable friends for the girls," he said, in an annoyed tone.

"I wish we could put a stop to their corresponding with the sisters. But we shall have them falling in love with the brother, if we don't take care."

"I wish you would speak to Harry and Julia yourself," said Constance coldly. "Anything *I* say would only do harm."

This was so true, that Moncrieffe felt himself compelled, though sorely against his will, to undertake the unpleasant task of speaking to Harry on the subject. Harry's tempers, though bad while they lasted, were never of very long duration, and during the last week she had been gradually thawing towards her father, till to-day she had consented to "kiss and be friends" again. It was a pity certainly to have to provoke her afresh, but there was no help for it, so taking an opportunity when he was out alone with the two girls, Moncrieffe began his task bravely.

"Harry, my dear, why did you make such a secret of Mr Day's visits to you?" he asked, gravely, but still gently.

"That is what *I* said," struck in Julia before her sister could reply. "But Harry is so queer about some things."

Julia's words, and the little affected laugh by which they were accompanied, irritated Harry, as Julia's words and manner always irritated her. She flushed and tossed back

her head, as she replied haughtily, that she had never meant to make a secret of anything.

"Still, it was thoughtless of you to receive this young man so constantly alone," replied Moncrieffe. "His making a point of coming when he knew your parents were out, shows that he was himself conscious that he had no right to aspire to your friendship."

"I don't see that," said Harry coldly. "He is the brother of the greatest friend I have in the world, and I consider he has a perfect right to my friendship. As for his coming when you were all out, he did that out of simple kindness, because he knew how horribly slow it was for me being locked up all alone."

"You may call it kindness, but it was not nice behaviour all the same, my dear. No nice person would take advantage of a young girl's simplicity to obtrude their acquaintance on her without the knowledge or sanction of her parents."

"You speak as if it was a dreadful thing for me to know Mr Day, papa."

"Well, he is not at all your equal in position—and all that. He is perfectly conscious of the difference between you himself, I can see. I would be the last person to counsel you to throw off old friends, and though I do not like the Misses Day personally, I would not try to put a stop to your intimacy

with them, merely from worldly motives—my objection to them is purely personal. But Mr Day has no claim of old friendship to recommend him. I do not think him a nice person, and he is certainly not a desirable friend for you."

"I cannot be rude to Carry and Netta's brother."

"There is no need for you to be so. But neither is there any need for you to be intimate with him."

Harry bit her lip and said no more; but she and Julia agreed, when they got home, that papa would never have said all that of his own accord, and that it was evidently Constance who had put him up to it. Harry might have respected her father's wishes had she believed them to be really his own; but she resolved not to submit to her step-mother's interference, and lost no opportunity of encouraging Mr Day's advances. That gentleman was sharp enough to see that Mr and Mrs Moncrieffe disliked him, and after Harry ceased to be confined to the house, he only paid one more visit to the Moncrieffes, to bid them good-bye before their departure from Paris. Constance declined to receive him however, on the plea that she and her daughters were "not at home," and great was the girl's wrath thereat.

"It's just like Archie's case over again,"

said Harry angrily; and that evening she pushed herself into the seat at dinner next to Mr Day, before Constance (who had lately made a point of occupying it, greatly to her step-daughters' disgust) could reach it, and bid him a warm good-bye before she left the table.

"I shall meet you again before long," he whispered, as he pressed her hand warmly in farewell.

"Oh, that will be awfully jolly," responded Harry cordially.

CHAPTER IX.

SIR ELDRED GLENDOWER.

IT was the end of January, and Rome was full. It was an unusually good season, people said; there were more carriages on the Pincio and in the public gardens than there had been for many years; and there were also more private parties. To-night was a gala night at the opera, and a stream of carriages was pouring towards the Costanzi theatre to hear a well-known tenor and a favourite *prima donna* in the "Traviata." The house was crowded from top to bottom, but the appearance was spoilt somewhat by the absence of ladies in the stalls. Nothing was to be seen in them save men, and here and there a woman in a bonnet. The men read newspapers and ate bon-bons between the acts; or smoked—in the corridors. Some of the fumes, however, penetrated to the interior of the house, and added to the heat of

the atmosphere, produced a rather disagreeable effect. In the boxes the ladies were well dressed, and as these boxes were not closed up in front with curtains, like the English pent holes, the whole interior was visible—not the two front seats only. In one of the boxes on the grand tier were four young men, two in the uniform of the Italian cavalry (foreign officers not being ashamed of adding to the picturesqueness of a scene, as English ones appear to be), and the other two in the hideous blackbird garb, which Englishmen have introduced into fashion. One of these latter was also Italian, but the other was evidently English. He was a singularly handsome young man of five-and-twenty, with a golden moustache; a straight, Greek nose; and sleepy blue eyes. Not a high intellectual style of beauty; but one that was greatly admired—especially by women. His manner was languid — almost affected; and the complexion of his face and hands, delicate as any girl's. As a boy at Eton, he had gone by the name of "My Lady," on account of his delicate complexion and gentle manners. Yet it was an acknowledged fact that "her ladyship" was a first-rate hand at outdoor sports and exercises of all sorts; while the masters found the pretty, gentle-looking lad one of the most inveterate "pickles" in the school. He rejoiced in the euphonious name of Sir Eldred Glendower, and was that

most unenviable of things—a poor baronet. His father had died when he was quite a child, leaving his property heavily encumbered. During Sir Eldred's long minority, some of the burdens had been cleared off the estate, but still the young baronet was anything but well off. His want of money did not seem to sit heavily on his mind, however (and, indeed, as a bachelor, he was not so hard up), for though he seldom went so far as to laugh himself, he was a decidedly cheerful person, and frequently moved his companions to mirth, while preserving his own languid gravity unbroken.

"Pretty house," he was remarking, languidly, in French. "Rather an improvement on some of the London boxes, this."

"Your London opera house is larger than this," remarked the other black-coated individual, a handsome young dandy, by name Count Enrico Monelli. "And the scenery and chorus is pitiable."

"The house is just the proper size to allow everyone to see well. I can see right over it with ease. Really, quite a galaxy of beauty opposite, isn't it? Seems to me I ought to know the face of that girl in pink. By Jove! (this in English) yes, of course."

All four opera-glasses were levelled at the box on the opposite side of the house, in which were seated three ladies, all good-looking, and a handsome, middle-aged man.

"The Moncrieffes—English," remarked one of the officers.

"To be sure," agreed Sir Eldred. "Those must be the daughters in front. Deuce of a shame to put the wife behind—she's ten times as well worth looking at."

"They say monsieur le mari does not care for her to be looked at."

"He'll have some difficulty to prevent it. She's the loveliest woman in Rome," observed Count Enrico enthusiastically.

"Fair hair and dark eyes—charming," added another.

"They are violet when you see them near," said Enrico complacently. "I must pay a visit to her box by-and-by—I know her pretty well. And the daughters too. *Peste*, your young ladies are brought up drolly in England, Glendower. They are neither of them out, those two Mees Moncrieffes; yet they talk so, that one can hardly speak to the charming step-mother."

"Mr Moncrieffe is my cousin," observed the baronet laconically. "No, don't trouble to apologise. Assure you, doesn't matter in the least. There are cousins and cousins, you know—one isn't bound to love all one's relatives. Not that Bruce Moncrieffe's half a bad sort; only I don't happen to know much of him personally. Made an awful ass of himself about his first marriage. Was only

twenty-one—great mistake to marry young. He's shown good taste in his second marriage, anyhow. Seems to talk more to the girls than his bride, though."

"It is that the young ladies talk more than Mrs Moncrieffe. Her voice is soft, and theirs are loud—*voilà tout, mon cher.* I have seen them out walking, and monsieur is never beside his wife. One of the daughters always takes her place, and she follows behind with the other. Yet he looks jealous of her!" and the young count laughed.

"Inconsistency of human nature," drawled Sir Eldred. "I must renew my acquaintance with him by-and-by. Used to know the eldest girl once, when she was younger. She's turned out rather handsome."

"She's worth cultivating, Glendower," observed Count Enrico. "She and her sister are both rich."

"Don't!" murmured the baronet, with a faint shudder of disgust.

His numerous lady friends were constantly recommending different heiresses to his notice, greatly to his annoyance. Indeed, as he observed, plaintively, to a friend,—

"It was enough to make a fellow cut the whole concern and run away, by Jove! Life wasn't worth living, if a fellow was always having young females of fortune thrown at his head. I've

contrived to dodge 'em pretty well so far, you know," he said; "but a fellow's bound to get knocked over some day, you know, if he's always being pelted. Make's a fellow feel so deuced ungracious, you know, always having to say 'No, thank you,' you know."

To marry a woman for her money seemed to the young fellow one of the meanest things of which a man could well be capable; and owing to his peculiar circumstances, and the very need in which he stood of money, he had come to have almost a morbid horror of being accused of fortune hunting. If a girl were reported an heiress, that alone was enough to scare him from her side for ever, however charming she might be in herself. Yet despite Count Enrico's hint about the Misses Moncrieffe's money, Sir Eldred made no objection to accompany the former to the Moncrieffes' box at the end of the first act. Mr Moncrieffe did not look altogether delighted to see the two young men at his door. He had noticed that their *lorgnettes* had been constantly levelled at his wife and daughters, and was disposed to resent this as an impertinence. A great many glasses had been turned towards the Moncrieffes' box to-night, and Bruce was annoyed. Some men would have been gratified by seeing their wife admired; but somehow Bruce did not like to see her stared

at. He did not wish her one iota less beautiful than she was, and would have been very seriously annoyed had she failed to set her charms off to proper advantage by becoming dress. Yet when other men turned their heads to look at her, he felt almost angry with *her!* Inconsistency of human nature! as Sir Eldred had observed. The baronet being his own cousin, however, Moncrieffe could hardly do less than welcome him civilly, and introduce him to his wife and daughters.

"Oh! I remember you quite well!" cried Harry, holding out her hand eagerly.

Moncrieffe had risen as the young men entered, and now he dropped into the seat behind his wife. Sir Eldred took the one in front of her, and next to Harry; while Count Enrico stood behind Sir Eldred, and facing Moncrieffe, leaning languidly against the wall. Harry, as Count Enrico had predicted, tried to talk to both the young men at once; but Monelli politely ignored her, and addressed himself pointedly to Mrs Moncrieffe. But Bruce seemed to have grown suddenly affable, and answered all the young Italian's remarks before Constance had time to do so. As for Julia, she felt herself left out in the cold as it were. She had Harry in front of her, and Constance beside her; and she wished devoutly now that she had not accepted her stepmother's offer of the front seat (Constance had

offered it, because she knew Bruce would like his girls to have the best places, though he might not say so), and cast envious glances at her sister and Sir Eldred. It was some consolation to her that Constance was very little better off than herself (to Julia, the one supreme good in the world was having some man to flirt with!); for though Count Monelli continually addressed himself to her, she responded but faintly, feeling that her husband on one side, and Julia on the other, were watching her jealously. At last the Italian prepared to retire in disgust, and Sir Eldred rose to accompany him.

"Oh, won't you stay, Sir Eldred?" cried Harry eagerly. "Do! there is heaps of room!"

So Sir Eldred, being, as he himself expressed it, of a weak and yielding nature, resumed his seat, and suffered Monelli to depart alone, marvelling at the forwardness of English meeses.

"I didn't know you were in Rome," began Moncrieffe, turning upon his cousin as soon as he had seen the count off the field.

"I've only been here a week. I think of staying a few days more—a week, perhaps."

"Ah! We have been here over three weeks."

"Ever been in Rome before?" inquired the baronet of Harry.

"No—and I think it's awfully stupid," she replied frankly.

"Don't like the antiquities, eh?"

"I detest the whole lot of them—don't you? Confess now!"

"Well—I would rather not commit myself by saying."

"What do you think of the opera?" struck in Moncrieffe again.

"Oh, Sir Eldred is charmed with it of course," replied Harry brusquely, not choosing to allow her father to interrupt *her* conversations with gentlemen, whatever he might do to Constance. "I'm sure you are fond of music, aren't you?" she added, gaily, to the young man.

"Very. Are you?"

"I detest it."

"What a shocking confession."

"I always speak the truth," replied the girl, looking fearlessly at him with her fine eyes.

"And you evidently speak the truth now, or you would not laugh and talk while that sweet voice is singing."

"Do you care to listen?" asked the girl, in real surprise.

"I would rather listen to you," he replied, bowing, and Harry laughed and looked flattered.

Sir Eldred remained seated in the Moncrieffe box till the end of the performance.

His back was to the stage, and he could see and hear little of what was going on; yet he seemed quite content. He spoke a few words to Mrs Moncrieffe, and Julia and her father both tried to put their word into the conversation, but Harry held her own firmly, and monopolised the young man's attention almost entirely.

"I'll look you up to-morrow," he said, as he shook hands with the Moncrieffes at their carriage door. "My hotel is close to your house."

"Mind you keep your word," laughed Harry graciously, as the carriage drove off.

"Well, I hope you enjoyed your evening, Harry," remarked Julia spitefully, as they drove home.

"Awfully," responded Harry cheerfully. "I remember meeting Sir Eldred at Moncrieffe, when I was a little girl."

"He's very badly off, poor fellow," remarked Moncrieffe.

"Is that the reason he doesn't live at his own home—Gwendale?" inquired Harry.

"Dear me, he seems to have told you all about himself," laughed Julia.

"Yes," responded Moncrieffe. "He won't let the place, or he could nearly double his income. But he likes to run down to it now and then for shooting and fishing. He keeps one old woman in the house, I believe, so

naturally he can't live there much, or have anyone to stay with him."

"Is it a pretty place?" asked Harry.

"I've never seen it, my dear."

"You can ask Sir Eldred when he calls to-morrow," added Julia. "He will be gratified to see what an interest you take in his affairs."

But Sir Eldred did not call on the Moncrieffes next day, greatly to Harry's vexation. On the second morning, however, he made his appearance soon after they had finished breakfast.

"An unconscionably early hour for a visit, isn't it?" he remarked, as he shook hands all round. "But if I had called at the conventional hour, the chances are I'd have found you out. People always are out in Rome."

"We are going to one of the endless picture galleries to-day," said Harry, yawning.

"I'm awfully fond of pictures," suggested the young man, smiling.

"Are you?" laughed Harry. "Then suppose you come with us this morning."

Moncrieffe frowned behind his paper, for he was not fond of having young men hanging about his house. But Sir Eldred was his cousin, and perhaps it was natural for young girls to like the companionship of those their own age. He had been very happy at Paris, when both his girls had devoted themselves exclusively to him; but, after all, he was an

elderly man, and he could not expect them to make so much of him now a younger man was here. But when they all sallied forth about an hour later, Julia slipped her arm through her father's as usual, and led the way with him, leaving Harry and Constance to follow with Sir Eldred. She had discovered that the baronet did not care to talk to her; so she thought she might as well gratify her father by walking with him. And he was very gratified, and thought her the sweetest little maiden in the world.

Sir Eldred found, as Mr Day had done before him, that it was rather unpleasant to be placed between Mrs and Miss Moncrieffe. He liked and admired them both, and he thought it a great pity that they should not get on together. Harry was a fine girl, but her tone of speaking to her step-mother was not nice. It was a pity —a very great pity, thought the young man. But he did not show that he felt uncomfortable, and talked impartially to the two ladies; and Harry somehow felt that she had better be civil to her step-mother in his presence. He would not understand the grievances which she had against Constance, and might think her unamiable. As for Constance, it was always a relief to her when the family party was broken by the presence of strangers. The girls were always better behaved before outsiders, and Sir Eldred had a peculiarly happy

manner of putting people at their ease. Here, at any rate, was a friend to whom no objections could be raised, and Constance hoped that Sir Eldred would console the girls for the loss of the Days and young Bird.

The following day Harry watched eagerly for the appearance of Sir Eldred, but during the day he did not come, and at dinner she complained that he had broken his word, for that he had promised to call to-day.

"You did not ask him, did you?" demanded Moncrieffe sternly.

"Yes, I did."

"And I seconded the invitation," added Constance gently. "Your cousin seems a very nice person, Bruce, and it must be pleasant for the girls to have young friends."

Moncrieffe said no more. He had a prejudice against young men as a race; but he had the good sense to see that, having two nice-looking daughters, he had better keep his objections to himself, or else prepare to play the domestic tyrant. As he did not wish to adopt the latter course, he saw he must reconcile himself to the inevitable, and admit the girls' admirers to his house.

After dinner, Sir Eldred made his appearance, and was welcomed warmly by the ladies. Even Moncrieffe smiled, for he liked his pleasant young cousin better than the generality of his own sex. They spent a very

pleasant evening. Somehow Harry tried instinctively to behave her best in the presence of the baronet, and she actually found herself speaking quite pleasantly to Constance once or twice. It was rather a trial to her, however, when the young man asked Mrs Moncrieffe to sing, and kept her at the piano for more than half-an-hour. Harry tried to talk to him while Constance was singing, but he shook his head and whispered "Hush," and rising, stood beside the piano. It was provoking he was so fond of music, she reflected, and she was not very pleased when he said that he played the violin, and begged leave to bring his in with him next evening. The following night he did make his appearance, with the instrument under his arm, and, after making Mrs Moncrieffe sing awhile, got her to play his accompaniments, while he played his violin.

After this he came in regularly every night, and Bruce, who was very fond of music, came quite to look forward to the daily concert. At first, it had been disagreeable to him to see his wife playing with another man, but the music soothed his irritation; and, after all, Sir Eldred was Harry's admirer, he reflected. Harry voted the "musicating," as she termed it, "awful bosh," but she did not mind it on the whole. It might be a bore certainly, but so long as the young man left

his violin here, it was an extra tie to bring him about the house.

In the day time, he often accompanied them to the different museums and churches, and Harry and Julia found these visits less irksome when he was with them. By the end of the first week he had become almost one of the family. He had the art of making himself at home with people immediately, and the Moncrieffes all liked him, and even Bruce was amused by him. He was so cheery and agreeable, and Harry had been in a perpetual good temper ever since he appeared upon the scene. Constance looked upon him as a perfect godsend; the whole aspect of their family life seemed changed since he had come, and won Harry into amiability.

Perhaps Julia was the one who liked him the least. He was Harry's admirer, not hers, and that alone was enough to prevent her being very well disposed towards him. He was always pleasant to her, however, and as yet she had hardly made up her mind about him. In the meantime, since it was useless to attempt to flirt with him, she exerted herself to charm her father still more, and to guard against the possibility of his falling in love with his own wife. No wonder Moncrieffe felt flattered by her loving attention, and yielded himself daily more and more to her influence.

CHAPTER X.

A PLEASANT EVENING.

IT was about a fortnight since the Moncrieffes had met Sir Eldred at the opera, and they were all seated in their drawing-room after dinner, expecting him. Presently the familiar step was heard outside, and the baronet entered and saluted the company.

"All hail!" he murmured softly, while his handsome blue eyes took in the whole position of the little family at a glance. "I am tired," he added, dropping comfortably into a seat by Mrs Moncrieffe's side. "As I have already shaken hands with you and your sister twice to-day, Miss Harry, perhaps you will excuse my crossing this long room to repeat the ceremony, in consideration of the pitiable state of exhaustion in which you behold me."

The two girls were seated, according to

their wont, one on either side of Moncrieffe, forming a sort of bodyguard round him, to protect him from Constance's wiles. He liked being petted by his girls, and thought that it was by her own choice that Constance had seated herself by the writing-table, at the other end of the room, instead of joining in the general conversation. But Constance saw that they were all enjoying themselves very much without her, and she did not feel herself strong enough to cope with Harry and Julia in a conversational tournament. She had just finished the letter she had been writing, but still she sat on by the writing-table, toying with some embroidery, and feeling herself an outcast from the family party.

She looked up with a smile as Sir Eldred sank into the comfortable chair beside her. She did not feel in spirits to talk much; but somehow, Sir Eldred was always so easy to get on with, and certainly it was a relief to have some one to sit beside her. It took away that terribly deserted feeling which had oppressed her before.

"Aren't you cold over there, Constance?" asked Moncrieffe, perceiving for the first time that his wife had ceased writing, and feeling it strange that she should sit thus by herself.

"No, thanks," replied Constance quietly. "I have been writing to my sister," she

added to Sir Eldred. "It is her birthday in a couple of days."

"Is it?" replied the baronet, in an interested tone.

He knew all about Mrs Moncrieffe's family already, and was ever ready to talk of them. Not that he felt any keen interest in her brothers and sister, but he had the way of being all things to all women, and seeing that it pleased pretty Mrs Moncrieffe to talk of her own people, he always showed himself ready to listen.

"Is your sister like you?" he asked next.

"Oh, no! not at all."

"That is a pity," said the young man, so simply, that Constance could not help laughing, whereupon he laughed too.

"This is Pearl's photograph," said Mrs Moncrieffe. "It is a new one she has had taken since I left home. I only got it this afternoon. It is very like her."

She had not shown the photograph to either her husband or his daughters yet. Somehow she had come to have a sort of cold, resentful feeling towards Bruce, which prevented her holding any sort of confidential communication with him; and she knew that the girls would have something disagreeable to say about Pearl if she mentioned her to them. They saw her give the card to Sir Eldred, however, and caught the meaning of what

she was saying, and an intense curiosity to see what Constance's sister was like, seized them, though they neither chose to say so.

"What a sweet little face," murmured Sir Eldred, forgetting his drawl, and speaking almost eagerly. "She is just what I should have imagined your sister to be like," he added, gradually dropping his voice.

"Yet she is not really like me, you know."

"She has a look of you, and I always think expression is the most attractive part of a face—don't you?"

"Well, if it is a sweet one."

"You are cold!" exclaimed the young man, seeing his companion shiver slightly; "and so am I. Let me roll this chair over to the fire for you. Have you ever tried this chair? Well, I advise you always to sit on it. It is simply delicious; should like to take root in it, you know, and remain in it for ever."

"Rather a rash wish that, Glendower," laughed Moncrieffe. "Now according to all orthodox rules, you ought to have your wish granted you, and live to repent it all the rest of your life."

"Oh, come, you needn't take a fellow up so sharply, you know," drawled the baronet, as he settled Constance's chair comfortably by the fire.

She let him do as he pleased, for now he was here she no longer feared to thrust herself into the fireside group. She always felt

more at home when strangers were present, and with a sigh of relief she sank into the warm and comfortable seat prepared for her. Sir Eldred seated himself between her and Harry, the latter of whom was rather offended because he had wasted a few minutes upon her step-mother. It was a vexation to her that he should seem to like Constance so much, yet she felt constrained to treat the latter civilly in his presence.

"Do you know anything about Roman scarfs, Mrs Moncrieffe?" asked Sir Eldred presently, after exchanging some laughing remarks with Harry. "Because I've got a letter from a friend in England, asking me to send her one," he added, nursing his knee tenderly, and gazing into the fire. "She said a Roman sash—with a blue ground. Do you know what a blue ground is?"

"Oh, yes. Would you like me to choose it for you?"

"That would be awfully good of you, and save me no end of worry. I never have the strength of mind to insist on getting what I want when I go into a shop. Somehow the people always make me buy something not at all like what I intended to get."

"They see weakness written in every line of your speaking countenance, I suppose," laughed Moncrieffe.

"Don't know, I'm sure," sighed Sir Eldred

plaintively. "But what can a fellow do, you know? Now the other day I went into a shop to buy a pair of gloves, and the woman would insist on making me take a necktie too. The old lady picked out an orange arrangement with red and blue spots, and put it up with the gloves, and handed me the parcel, with a seraphic smile. I was in a wax, and of course forgot the lingo. 'Don't want it,' I bawled. 'Don't —want—it;' and I shook my head and made faces. But she wouldn't understand. She undid the parcel, and I thought she was going to take the yellow reptile out; but to my horror she pretended to think I wanted another, and put up a green thing striped with yellow. Oh, you needn't laugh; I assure you I felt ready to cry—did indeed. But I had to take the things. If I'd made any more fuss, she'd have put up a third tie, you know."

"Poor old boy," said Moncrieffe compassionately. "If that's the way they treat you, I think you had certainly better let Constance choose the sash for you."

"Does your friend mention the breadth of the sash, or anything?" asked Constance, who had also been moved to laughter by Sir Eldred's dolorous expression, and piteous accent, whilst narrating the adventure of the ties.

"She said it was to be a blue ground—I remember that."

"And the price?" continued Constance, still in a business-like tone.

"Oh, she says it must be very handsome; but she says nothing about the money—except that she will pay me when she sees me," added the young fellow, in rather a dubious tone.

"Is there any doubt about her doing so?" asked Harry laughing.

"None in the world, I'm afraid," sighed Sir Eldred. "I know, from sad experience, that she is certain *not* to pay me. She will have forgotten all about it by the time she sees me."

"Then I wonder you can be so soft as to get the scarf for her," said Harry promptly.

"Well, you see it is the nature of this beast to be soft, my dear young lady. All my friends know it, and they take a mean advantage of it. When I left England, one lady asked me to take a puppy to her grandchild in Paris; and my landlady gave me a packet of sweet stuff for the child of her late mistress, in Florence. Well—put 'em both in my box—when I got to Paris, puppy was dead, and beast of a *douane* man charged me a small fortune for carrying a *corpse* in the train. On reaching Florence, found that the sweet stuff had melted, and spoilt my best suit of go-to-meetings. Now that's what I call hard on a fellow, you know."

"The poor puppy!" said Constance.

"Meaning me or the other puppy, ma'am?"

"*You* certainly deserve no pity; you are evidently incorrigible," struck in Harry, laughing.

"Come, are we to have any music to-night?" said the baronet, walking over to the piano; and for the remaining half-hour of his stay harmony was the order of the evening.

"What was that you were saying to Eldred about your sister's birthday, Constance?" asked Moncrieffe, after his cousin's departure, and when the girls had also retired.

"Only that I had been writing to wish her many happy returns of the day. She will be eighteen in a few days."

"You ought to send her a present as well, don't you think?"

"I don't think so," said Constance quietly, as she arranged her music, and closed the piano.

"But why not? It would please the child."

"You are very kind, but—I do not care to spend your money on presents for my people," replied Constance coldly, as she left the piano and crossed over to the fire, by which her husband was standing.

He was never a man of many words, and she was hardly surprised when he made no reply to her last remark; but when presently she grew uncomfortable at the long silence, and raised her eyes to his face, she saw that

he was regarding her with a serious, grieved, and slightly perplexed expression, that made her feel rather ashamed of her last ungracious speech. He looked away, however, when he met her eyes; and after yawning to conceal her embarrassment, she left the room in silence, feeling that she had put herself in the wrong, and repulsed her husband when he meant to be kind. But the barrier of cold reserve which stood between them was too impenetrable to allow her to go back and tell him she was sorry for what she had said.

CHAPTER XI.

PERNICIOUS ADVICE.

EARLY the next morning Sir Eldred betook himself again to the Moncrieffes' apartments, and found them still seated at breakfast. As he entered the room unannounced, Harry, who sat with her back to the door, was saying,—

"That's all nonsense! He's awfully nice really, I am sure. It was all bosh about that puppy; he only said it to make us laugh."

Here the smiles of those around made Harry pause and look round, and she flushed and laughed as she caught sight of Sir Eldred.

"So I see I have one friend at court who defends me when I am absent," he said, smiling quite kindly at her.

"How do you know I was speaking of you?" she asked, saucily.

"Always know when people are talking of me—ears been tingling all the morning, you know."

"Oh, we have not been abusing you," simpered Julia.

"Ah—really," drawled Sir Eldred, in the tone he always employed to silly young ladies.

"Will you have some coffee?" asked Constance.

"No, thanks; I have breakfasted."

"You're uncommonly early this morning," remarked Moncrieffe. "I didn't give you credit for being so active."

"Ah! no; I never do get credit for any virtues. Whenever I do anything worthy of praise, people all stare as if they had seen a—a comet, you know, or—or something of that sort. Now that's what I call hard on a fellow, you know."

"I'm afraid the world is rather too rough for you, poor old fellow," smiled Bruce.

"It is," replied Sir Eldred, with a profound sigh. "I'd horrid dreams all last night," he went on presently, after stroking his blonde moustache lazily for a few minutes, and gazing thoughtfully at Mrs Moncrieffe.

"What were they?" asked Harry eagerly.

"Sashes — and neckties," drawled the baronet.

"Ah! I suppose you want to get that sash as soon as possible," said Constance. "If you like we could go about it this morning."

"I was afraid to suggest it, for fear you might have something else to do. But I

should be glad to get that weight off my mind. I should be sorry to pass such another night as this last one has been, owing to my anxiety of mind about that blessed sash."

"Then we will go about it as soon as I have written some letters," smiled Constance, as she rose from the breakfast table.

During the next hour or so, Sir Eldred amused himself practising on his violin, and conversing with Harry, who was much more tolerant of the music now that he was the sole performer. When by-and-by they all sallied forth in quest of the sash, Sir Eldred took up his position by Mrs Moncrieffe's side, leaving the two girls to follow by themselves, greatly to their disgust. When they reached the shop, they stood gloomily apart, and declined even to look at the pile of gay-coloured ribbons from which Constance had speedily selected a handsome scarf. A short time ago she would have called the girls to her, and tried to draw them out of their sulks by asking them to help her in her choice. But she had given that sort of thing up now as hopeless, and it was only after she had made her selection, that Sir Eldred asked Harry whether she too admired it.

"Oh! I don't know," replied the young lady sharply, and the baronet retired discomfited to Constance's side again.

"I'm afraid our Harry is rather irate," he

remarked *sotto voce* to Mrs Moncrieffe; who sighed and shrugged her shoulders by way of response.

"Shall I endeavour to restore her temper to its usual exquisite equanimity," he asked, smiling.

"Do you think you can?" asked Constance doubtfully. "It is so dreadful for me when those girls are cross," she added, despondingly.

"I know," he answered kindly; and as the shopman handed them their parcel just then, Sir Eldred stepped up to Harry's side, and showed that he wished to be her esquire on the way home. The young lady's temper speedily improved upon this, and she suggested that, instead of going straight home, they should prolong their walk by going up to the Pincio. So she led the way thither with Sir Eldred; but it is to be feared that Constance did not much enjoy her walk with Julia, who was both sulky and silent. On the whole, she thought, she would rather have allowed Harry to remain in a bad temper for the rest of the day, and enjoyed Sir Eldred's pleasant companionship during the rest of this walk. On reaching the Pincio, she sat down on a bench under the trees, and the others sat beside her, but did not make themselves very agreeable to her. She was at one end of the seat, and Sir Eldred

at the other, and the two girls were planted between them like a wall.

"Surely that is Madame Vespri's carriage," said Harry, pointing to a brougham that was standing by. "She said she often came up here in the morning to exercise that horrid dog of hers."

Constance looked up eagerly—any stranger was welcome who would stand between her and her step-daughters. At that minute Madame Vespri came in sight, walking slowly after the fat French poodle that she led by a string of blue ribbon. The dog kept stopping to inspect the passers-by, or to stretch himself and yawn, and whenever he stopped madame stopped too. She made a slave of herself to that dog, and called it her *Bébé*. Constance rose, and leaving her step-daughters and Sir Eldred to entertain each other, made her way up to Madame Vespri, who received her warmly.

"Ah, my dear, this is an unexpected pleasure. I came here to exercise my poor Bébé who grows so fat; but I seldom see any friends here in the mornings," said madame.

She was a stout, good-looking woman of about five-and-forty. By birth she was Irish; but she had married an Italian gentleman when only sixteen, and had been left a widow at thirty. Ever since her marriage she had lived on the continent, and she was foreign in all

her ideas and ways. She retained her Irish thoughtlessness and good-nature, however, and was altogether a very pleasant person, if not exactly an admirable one. She was not exactly the sort of friend Constance would have chosen naturally; but under existing circumstances the young wife found the jovial lady's society a decided relief.

"I saw you at the opera about two weeks ago," said Madame Vespri, subsiding into a seat, with Bébé on her lap. "I hear you have never been seen there since."

"No; my husband does not care about going out at night."

"Bah! you should not let him tyrannise over you like that. It is well known why he shuts you up so—he does not like to see you stared at. In the opera, I saw how black he looked every time a glass was turned towards you. And that poor Count Enrico was quite miserable all the rest of the evening, because he was not permitted to speak to you."

"Really, Madame Vespri, I do not see why you should speak in that tone," said Constance, offended.

"Don't you, my dear? Then that's a good thing. To my mind a jealous husband is the worst of all inflictions. And if you'll take the advice of an old woman, you won't give in to it. Yield at the beginning, and you'll be a slave all your life. Now, if you flirted a little

(in discretion, of course), and let your husband see that you have a will of your own, he'd think twice as much of you."

Madame talked on in one continuous flow, and Constance found it impossible to stop her. But presently, seeing that her companion looked really annoyed, the good-natured lady dropped the subject, and talked of other things. The son of one of the Roman princes was to be married to-day, and to-night there was to be a grand ball to celebrate the event. Madame Vespri was delighted to hear that Constance was to be there, and they chatted about it and other things pleasantly for some time. They were sitting not far from the Moncrieffe girls and Sir Eldred, and presently Harry's voice was heard calling out that they were going home.

"Do you allow your step-daughter to order you about like that!" laughed Madame Vespri. "My dear, you are a very foolish young woman. Now I want you and your husband to dine with me to-morrow, and go to the opera afterwards. Come, you must say yes. Count Enrico is to dine with me too. A great admirer of yours, by-the-bye, I believe, poor fellow. Now positively you must come. Let Mr Moncrieffe see that you are not afraid to accept an invitation without asking his leave."

"Why should I be afraid, Madame Vespri?" asked Constance haughtily. "I shall be very

happy to dine with you; and so will Mr Moncrieffe, I am sure."

Here both ladies became aware that Julia was standing beside them. Harry and Sir Eldred were out of sight, and Julia had evidently waited to accompany her step-mother, and might have been standing by her for some time.

"Good-bye, good-bye!" cried Madame Vespri hurriedly. "Come, my Bébé—my angel; come then."

Julia was still sulky on the way home, for Sir Eldred had paid her no attention to-day. While Madame Vespri had been talking, Constance had felt several times that she ought not to listen to her, but rejoin her step-daughters; but now she could not help regretting the pleasant lady, as she walked wearily on beside sulky Julia.

On reaching home both Constance and Harry pressed Sir Eldred to come upstairs, where they found Bruce, who had gone out before them, reading the *Times*. He merely glanced up without speaking as the others entered; but when Constance went away to her room to take off her walking things, he followed her, somewhat to her surprise.

"What is it?" she asked, in the quiet, rather cold tone, which she now usually employed when speaking to her husband.

"When I was out this morning I got these;

do you like them ?" he asked rather nervously, as he placed a case containing a lovely set of pink coral and gold in his wife's hands.

"They are very pretty indeed," she replied, calmly. "Who are they for ?"

"Well, since you refused to buy Pearl anything, I thought I must. It will be only kind to take the child something pretty when we go home."

"For Pearl ! It is very good of you, Bruce," said Constance flushing, as she held up her face to her husband's.

"I am glad you think she will like them," he said, as he kissed her gravely.

But Constance had grown accustomed to his gravity by this time, and was no longer frightened by it as she had been at first, and she saw that there was a very kind look in the grave, dark eyes that met her own. Certainly it was very good of Bruce to buy those corals for Pearl, after the ungracious rebuff which she (Constance) had given him last night ; but yet the young wife's heart was chilled and crushed within her. She was hungering and craving for love and sympathy ; and all her husband had to offer her was kindly pity ! Still, such as it was, he offered it to her kindly and well-meaningly, and Constance felt that it behoved her to accept it in the same spirit as it was offered.

"They are very pretty," she repeated

gently, "and I am sure Pearl will like them very much indeed. It was very kind of you to think of her."

She tried to smile up at him as she spoke, and to subdue the weary tone in her voice; and Bruce thought he had never seen her look so sweet and lovable as she did at this minute. He was not one to show his feelings openly, however, and merely said, in his usual quiet way,—

"Wouldn't you like to show them to the girls?"

"Oh, yes, of course," assented Constance, turning towards the door, though sooth to say she greatly disliked the idea of showing Harry and Julia the present which their father had bought for her sister, knowing that they would regard it with jealous, displeased eyes.

The two girls were still standing talking to Sir Eldred, with their hats on, when Moncrieffe and Constance entered the drawing-room, and they both exclaimed with admiration as Constance placed the lovely set of corals on the table before them. But then they paused abruptly, and Harry said coldly,—

"I suppose papa has bought them for you?"

"No, they are for my sister Pearl," said Constance. "Is it not kind of your father?"

"Oh, for Pearl," said Harry. She had no

ill-feeling to the girl whom she had never seen, and was not petty enough to grudge her her pretty present. But Julia was, and her pale blue eyes glittered with envy as they rested on the corals. It was bad enough to see her father spending his money on Constance; but to waste it on Constance's poor relations was too aggravating.

"How jolly it must be for Pearl to have a rich sister," she said softly. "You will be able to keep all your relations going in pretty things now. Do you know that it was for your own aunt, Mrs Greville, that you chose that sash this morning," and she ended with a light, easy laugh, while Constance flushed and bit her lip, and Moncrieffe frowned angrily.

The girl's manner was so simple and innocent, that the father could hardly believe she really meant to be ill-natured, and Sir Eldred too felt puzzled to understand her. The latter saw by the faces of Constance and Harry, however, that *they* both believed Julia to be guilty of wilful impertinence, and after answering some questions which Mrs Moncrieffe put about Mrs Greville, he drew Harry away into the next room, under pretext of showing her something from the window, and as soon as they were out of earshot of the others, he inquired,—

"What did your sister mean by that, eh?

Is she stupid or clever? She is altogether beyond my limited powers of comprehension, you know."

"Oh, she meant every word of it," said Harry contemptuously. "I know her rather too well by this time to be taken in by her artless, baby air. If I were in Constance's place, I'd not like to spend my husband's money on my people certainly; but I think it was a horribly mean thing of Julia to say anything about it."

"And besides, it was your father who bought the coral, not Mrs Moncrieffe. I don't suppose she knew anything about it till just now."

"Perhaps not," said Harry slowly.

"I am very angry with Julia for saying what she did about Mrs Greville too. I had no idea Mrs Greville was your mother's aunt; but when I found out, I would not have told Mrs Moncrieffe in such a disagreeable manner."

"Oh, Julia isn't nice at times," said Harry rather impatiently, "but after all I don't see anything to make such a fuss about."

"Don't you? I shouldn't have thought you were one to think lightly of wounding people's feelings."

"Oh, I don't suppose Constance minds what Julia says," said the girl hastily.

"Don't you? Then I am certain she *does*

mind very much. She looks very unhappy sometimes."

"Does she?" Harry's eyes opened to their widest extent, and she gazed at her companion wonderingly.

"Indeed she does. Have you never seen it?"

"Never. I often think she looks cross though."

The young man bit his lip, and made an impatient movement with his fair head. For several minutes he remained silent, trying to subdue his rising temper, then he asked, abruptly,—

"Why do you dislike your step-mother so much? What cause has she ever given you?"

"Oh, heaps," replied Harry emphatically.

"I don't believe it."

"You needn't, if you don't like," replied Harry, much offended. "Nobody asked you to believe anything."

The baronet laughed.

"A hint to me to mind my own business, eh? But it's no good your trying to teach me. It's a lesson that I've been trying to learn all my life, but somehow" (with a sigh) "I've never been able. Now, about you, it is such an awful pity, you know, to see a fine character spoilt by some one thing; and nothing spoils people so much as indulging in a hatred for somebody else. I assure you, my

dear, I have seen the world, and know it well, and am well qualified to give you good advice, if not to benefit you by my example."

Harry could not resist laughing at the air of solemn morality which sat so comically upon the young man, while his allusion to her "fine character" soothed her vanity, and made her resent his fault-finding less than she might otherwise have done. Also, to tell the truth, she was not a little flattered and pleased by the tone of interest and confidence which he assumed towards her. Still, she wished he had not seemed to like Constance so well, and though she laughed, she made no reply.

"I can't bear to see you looking cross, and to hear you say unkind things, you know," he proceeded. "It is such a pity—really it is."

Harry looked down, and played with her parasol in silence, while a rich colour mounted to her cheeks. She could not quite make up her mind whether to be flattered or offended, and before she could come to any decision, the entrance of the servant to lay the table for luncheon put a stop to the *tête-à-tête.*

"Well, what a long time you have been confabbing together," laughed Julia, as they returned to the drawing-room. "Has Eldred been proposing to you, Harry?"

"Good Lord!" exclaimed the baronet, with well-feigned horror; "why, I do believe you

are turning green, Miss Julia! Ah! now you know you should be careful and not indulge in too much jealousy and spite. It would be dreadful if you lost your charming complexion. Knew a lady who turned green once, really, you know," he wound up laconically.

Harry laughed heartily, and Julia also tried to smile; but she never forgave the baronet for his words that day, to the end of her life.

CHAPTER XII.

FORBIDDEN FRUIT.

AT Constance's invitation, Sir Eldred remained to luncheon with his cousin's family. This was a relief to Mrs Moncrieffe, for while he was present, things always arranged themselves smoothly. She took advantage of his being there to inform Bruce of Madame Vespri's invitation, and of her acceptance of it. She knew that, after the way Madame Vespri had spoken to-day, she ought not to have accepted her invitation; but the temptation to do so had been too great to resist. For one thing, she dearly loved the opera, and then it was *such* a relief to spend an evening from home.

True, her evenings at home were much less trying now that Sir Eldred was so much there to keep the girls in good humour; but still Constance longed for fresh scenes. She was

sick to death of always sitting in the same chair in the same room, and listening to the same voices. Any change would be a relief, she felt.

Bruce made no comment upon her information, and she was at a loss to understand him. Never mind, she told herself, it was right that he should see she was the mistress of his house, and be made to understand that she had a right to give and accept invitations; unless he particularly warned her against the people, of course. Hitherto he had set his face rather against much party-going—not openly, but he had always appeared glad to find an excuse for declining invitations. And his wife had also been indifferent on the subject. But now she thought she would like a little variety.

"Papa, Sir Eldred is dying to go to Prince A—'s ball to-night," said Harry.

She had been complaining bitterly to Sir Eldred during their walk, that, though she had come out the previous summer at Brighton, Constance had persuaded "papa" to shut her up now.

"They say I shall not be *properly* out till I've been presented next season," she said indignantly. "Did you ever hear such stuff and rubbish!"

The baronet, after vainly trying to assuage the damsel's wrath, had at last diverted her attention by informing her that he too could

not go to the ball to-night for want of an invitation.

"Oh, you must go with papa and Constance," replied Harry promptly; and at lunch she attacked her father on the subject, as above mentioned.

"He'd better come with us," said Moncrieffe pleasantly; and the young man accepted gratefully.

The meal passed off pleasantly. Sir Eldred talked jointly to Harry and her step-mother, between whom he sat; and, strange to say, Harry did not snub the latter, though she was cross at not being allowed to go to the ball. No doubt Sir Eldred's tact was in a great measure to thank for this, as he contrived not only to draw Constance and Harry into the same conversation, but also to make them address each other frequently. Moncrieffe looked and rejoiced; and Julia looked and wondered.

"I begin to think you must be in love with Eldred," said the latter mockingly, when she and her sister were alone together.

"What do you mean?" flashed Harry.

"Why, surely you must have lost your heart to him when you can let him persuade you into being amiable to Constance."

"I don't see that I was particularly amiable to her."

"Why, you *talked to her*."

"Well, so do you."

"Yes, but then I never quarrelled with her in the way you do."

"No, *you* confine yourself to doing and saying nasty, mean things to her behind papa's back. I declare, I sometimes feel almost inclined to take her part."

"That's good," scoffed Julia, "when you are as rude as ever you can be to her! I'm sure I never behave to her in the way you do."

"At any rate I'm open and honest. *I'm* not a sneak," retorted Harry, as she marched out of the room.

Mrs Moncrieffe set out for her ball in unusually good spirits that night, for in the first place she had on a perfect dress, and knew that she was looking lovely; and then Sir Eldred's presence made the drive so much more cheerful. He made Bruce come out of his customary shell of silence, and laugh and talk a little, and this alone would have won him Constance's sincere gratitude. Somehow she never felt quite comfortable when Bruce was sitting beside her in that grave silence of his; but when he spoke and laughed, a weight seemed removed from her mind.

Poor Harry had looked very disconsolate at being left alone, and had shown some temper, perhaps naturally, to her step-mother. But Constance had told herself desperately that she *did not care*. She had a restless feeling

to-night as if she *must* enjoy herself—as if she *could* not go on worrying herself for ever; and she put the remembrance of her step-daughter's disagreeable words and manner resolutely aside for the time.

The ball was a brilliant affair. Prince A— was one of the richest men in Rome, and no expense had been spared in the decorations, etc. Constance had been to small country balls before, but never had she seen anything in the least approaching to this, and she felt dazzled and bewildered as she gazed round upon the fairy-like scene.

Many people turned to look at her as she passed along the crowded and brilliantly-lighted halls and staircases, leaning on her husband's arm, and he was conscious of this, and felt proud of her beauty—so long as she remained hanging on *his* arm. But on entering the ball-room, Sir Eldred, who had been walking on her other side, bent down and asked her to dance with him. He spoke in a low tone, and Bruce, who was looking the other way, to speak to a friend, did not hear.

When he looked round again, the first thing he saw was his pretty wife floating away from him with his cousin. He frowned heavily, for he particularly objected to see married women dance. As he had never told Constance this, he felt that he had no right to scold her *this* time; yet somehow he fancied that her own

good taste ought to have been sufficient guide for her. But Constance was in rather a reckless mood to-night. She knew quite well that her husband would be vexed with her for dancing—though she could not have told why. But she resolved to take advantage of his never having forbidden her to dance in so many words, and to enjoy herself for this one evening.

She was young and pretty, and *so* fond of dancing; and why should she not amuse herself? It was absurd of Bruce to expect her to behave like an old woman, just because his girls happened to be grown up. Perhaps, unknown to herself, Madame Vespri's words had put new ideas into her head.

She had not intended to dance before she came, but a charming waltz was being played as she entered the dancing saloon, and when Sir Eldred pressed her to dance it with him, she could not resist. He was a charming partner, and Constance enjoyed her waltz to the utmost. She felt herself a girl once more, and forgot that she had step-daughters, or any other kind of worry. After the dance, Sir Eldred led her about the rooms and corridors, letting her see and admire everything to her heart's content. In a few minutes a polka struck up, and Sir Eldred asked his companion if she cared to dance it.

"No, I only waltz," she replied, thinking it wiser not to dance every dance.

all this? Was not her husband right to prevent such a state of things?

"Perhaps you are right," she said, after gazing absently into the fire for some time.

She thought of her husband's kindness about the corals, and felt that he did try to be kind to her to the best of his ability. What he had said too, about being so much older than herself, had touched her. Of course, poor Bruce was rather old, and perhaps it was natural he should be envious of "young fellows," as he had called them.

"Perhaps you are right. I won't dance again," she sighed.

"That is right, my dear," he replied, kissing her gravely.

"I suppose Madame Vespri would call me a fool," thought Constance, as she took herself disconsolately off to her own room. "Perhaps I am; but at any rate I have done my duty."

CHAPTER XIII.

JULIA MAKES MISCHIEF.

THE following morning Constance saw, from her husband's manner, that he was pleased with her for having yielded to his wishes so quietly last night, and she felt more than ever glad that she had done so. She had always had a horror herself of frisky matrons, and resolved never to degenerate into one if she could help it. If Bruce objected to her dancing, it was clearly her duty to obey him, even at the sacrifice of her own pleasure.

In the afternoon she and the girls went for a drive first in the Borghese Gardens, and then on the Pincio. In the former, they overtook Madame Vespri, who had quitted her carriage for a few minutes to give Bébé her constitutional. Harry was still cross about not going to the ball last night, and Julia too had been rather unpleasant, so, on catching

sight of her friend, Mrs Moncrieffe joyfully stopped her own carriage, and getting out, walked beside Madame Vespri until the latter re-entered her carriage, which was following slowly. Harry and Julia remained in their seats, for Madame Vespri was not a great favourite of theirs. The Irishwoman was a warm partisan, if a somewhat imprudent one, and she had let the Misses Moncrieffe see pretty plainly that she liked and pitied their step-mother, but did *not* like them. So they sat in the carriage and yawned wearily, as the two ladies paced slowly on ahead, chatting.

"I say, Constance, if you are going to be much longer we'll drive on, and leave you to follow with Madame Vespri," cried Harry, after ten minutes, remembering that time was going on, and that Sir Eldred had said he would meet them on the Pincio.

"How dare you speak to your mother like that!" cried Madame with considerable energy. "She'll just stay as long as she pleases."

"Then we sha'n't wait for her," retorted Harry angrily.

"Ye needn't. She'll enjoy herself a deal better without ye, *I* can tell ye."

But Constance would not consent to let the girls drive to the Pincio alone, and bidding her friend goodbye got into her carriage again.

On that same afternoon Moncrieffe had also

gone to the Pincio for want of anything better to do. The band (a very poor one by the way) was playing, and a crowd of nurse-maids and children, soldiers and citizens surrounded it. Moncrieffe took his place on one of the chairs which formed a semi-circle on either side of the band-stand, and amused himself by watching the children, and the carriages which passed and repassed on the drive close by. Presently a fat lady with a huge parasol came and planted herself beside him; and a minute afterwards two officers came and sat on her other side. Moncrieffe knew them both by sight, but they did not see him on account of the old lady's parasol.

"Ah! there is the beautiful Mrs Moncrieffe and her daughters," Bruce heard one of them say (for he understood Italian), and bending forward he caught sight of his wife's carriage drawn up in line with the other equipages.

"Those young ladies are always with her. What a nuisance she must find them. Report all she says and does to their papa, I suppose. They don't look as if they loved her."

"Oh, of course they're jealous—she's so much better looking," laughed the other. "And then married women are so much more *piquante* than girls."

"She's kept pretty tight, I expect. Looks as if she were afraid of speaking to one generally."

"She seemed to enjoy herself last night though. Was able to get away from her old husband for a little, ha, ha. *Sapristi*, but she did look lovely! no one to come near her in the rooms. Enrico Monelli quite raves about her."

"So do a good many more."

Moncrieffe waited to hear no more, but rising made his way round the opposite side of the band (for he did not wish the officers to know that he had overheard their remarks about his wife) to the place where his wife's carriage was standing.

Two young men—Count Enrico and Sir Eldred—were standing beside it talking and laughing. The former had secured the best place near Mrs Moncrieffe, and was looking up at her with what Harry contemptuously termed, a "dying duck" expression. Sir Eldred stood further off from Constance, but she was smiling and talking to him quite as much as to the Italian. Both Harry and Julia were feeling cross; Harry because Julia was on the side of the carriage next Sir Eldred, and Julia because the baronet talked to Constance instead of to her. She and Eldred never got on together, so this was natural on his part; yet when Harry asked her sister to change places with her, the latter refused. The two girls sat silent for the most part therefore—Julia, because neither of the young

men would respond to her advances; and Harry, because it was not easy to talk to Eldred across Julia and Julia's parasol. Moncrieffe felt savage when he saw the youth, who was supposed to "rave about Mrs Moncrieffe," leaning against Constance's carriage, and gazing languishingly up at her. Constance ought to keep the young puppy in his place, thought the husband angrily; and he looked so black when he came up, that both the young fellows took themselves off pretty quickly.

"Isn't it time for you to be going home, Constance, if you have to dress for dinner?" suggested Moncrieffe.

"Very well," replied Constance quietly. She understood quite well why her husband looked vexed, and she wondered wearily whether he meant to be angry every time another man spoke to her.

"Let me walk home with you, papa darling," cried little Julia eagerly; and the father smiled, and opened the door for her to descend, though he had originally intended to escort his wife home in the carraige.

"Well, I don't think Constance need scold Harry and me for flirting any more," pouted Julia, as she and her father walked off.

"Why?"

"Oh, didn't you see how she was flirting herself?"

"She was not."

"Oh, she never does when you are there of course. But she does behind your back. I'm sure Count Enrico is in love with—"

"Julia!"

"He is! He always spends *hours* beside our carriage on the Pincio when you aren't there" (this was not true). "I'm sure he gave her those white lilies you admired so much yesterday" (the bouquet Constance had taken to the ball). "She *said* she bought them, but—"

"Julia, I insist on your dropping the subject. I am more pained than I can say, to hear you speak like this of my wife."

"Forgive me, darling papa. I did not mean to vex you. But I thought I ought to tell you."

They walked on in silence for some time. It was the sight of her father's frowning face, when he saw young Monelli beside Constance, that had put the idea of accusing her stepmother of flirtation into Julia's head. She saw that her father was disposed to be jealous, and being furiously jealous herself, because the various gentlemen whom they met on the Pincio all ignored her, in order to talk to Constance or Harry, she took advantage of her father's humour, to get Constance into "a row." After an interval of silence she said abruptly,—

"Papa, do you know I don't like that Madame Vespri at all—do you?"

"Not particularly; but she is amusing and good-natured."

"*I* think she's horrid. I always thought so; but I can never like her after the way she spoke to Constance the other day."

"Why, was she rude to her?"

"Oh, no—at least she didn't mean to be. She spoke of Count Enrico Monelli's being a great admirer of Constance's—and that sort of thing, you know. But Constance only laughed and blushed and looked pleased" (lies, it is needless to say); "so I suppose it wasn't rude—"

"I told you just now, Julia—"

"Oh, it wasn't *that* I meant to tell you. It was what Madame Vespri said about *you*" (Moncrieffe pricked up his ears). "After telling Constance that Count Enrico was to dine with her to-night—"

"Is he?"

"So she told Constance, by way of inducing her to accept the invitation. 'Well, then,' she said, 'come, say yes; and let Mr Moncrieffe see that you are not afraid to accept an invitation without waiting for his permission.' I think those were her words."

"What did Constance say?"

"Oh, she just laughed, and then she saw me, and stopped."

"They didn't know you were near them?"

"No."

Silence for several minutes; then Moncrieffe asked,—

"Will you explain what you meant about those flowers, if you please, Julia?"

"Oh, certainly," she replied, though she was rather frightened by his tone. "I saw Count Enrico speaking to a flower man in the morning, and in the afternoon the same man brought the bouquet to our apartments."

"That is nothing."

"I think it is," persisted Julia obstinately.

"You don't know what you are talking about," said the father angrily; and Julia wisely made no reply.

Constance could not tell what was the matter with her husband that night. He was often silent; but to-night he was something more—though what that something was, she could not make out. There was no one at Madame Vespri's except themselves and young Monelli. It ought to have been a charming little *parti carré*, if Bruce had not looked so solemn. As it was, the other three were very lively, and Constance was glad to avoid a *tête-à-tête* with the count by drawing Madame Vespri into her conversation. But still she did not like to see Bruce looking so grave, and almost displeased. It looked as if he were *jealous*, and Constance felt this an indignity to herself. She tried to make herself agreeable, however, to atone to her hostess for

her husband's silence; but it was an effort for her to look cheerful, when all the time she felt herself in disgrace with her husband. What *had* she done to vex him now? she wondered.

At the opera she and the hostess of course occupied the front seat, and it seemed natural for Count Enrico to take the seat next her, while Bruce sat beside his hostess. But to Moncrieffe it seemed as if his wife were allowing the young count to pay her public attention before the whole of Rome. Again a good many glasses were turned towards the pretty Mrs Moncrieffe, and again Mr Moncrieffe frowned. He could not accuse Constance of flirting with Monelli; yet why had she consented to come to the theatre with him, when she knew him to be her admirer? And had not Julia declared that she *did* flirt behind her husband's back?

Constance became rather silent after entering the box. She felt almost afraid to talk before her husband, and answered Count Enrico's remarks in monosyllables. She turned all her attention to the opera; for she was very fond of music, and as she had not been to many operas in her life, she enjoyed everything. The girls did not care for operas, so they had only been to the theatre once, much to Constance's disappointment. But she did not like to urge her own wishes

in opposition to Harry and Julia's; yet now that she was at the opera, she could not enjoy it, though there was the same *prima donna* who had enchanted her so much last time. She was glad when the performance was over, and they prepared to depart.

Madame Vespri seized Moncrieffe's arm as they left the box, so he had to let the count be his wife's escort to the carriage, sorely against his will. Again, as on the previous night, the husband and wife drove home in perfect silence, only this time Constance could imagine no cause of displeasure on her husband's part. He was reflecting that Constance ought not to have accepted Madame Vespri's invitation for to-night, when she knew Count Enrico was to be of the party, and recalling angrily that she had danced once with the count last night. How could she do so, when she knew that he was her admirer?

"I don't like that Madame Vespri, Constance," he said, sternly, the following morning, when that lady's name was mentioned at the breakfast table. "I do not wish you to cultivate her much."

It was all very well for Madame Vespri to say, "Stand up and fight for your own way," but it was impossible to resist Bruce when he looked like that.

Constance sighed at the thought of giving up her good-natured little friend, thanks to

whom she had spent so many hours of comparative pleasure and freedom, but she saw that she would have to do so. She had promised to drive with madame this afternoon, as the girls and their father were going on a long walking expedition, in which she did not care to join, and she felt that she must keep this one engagement, or else appear discourteous to her friend. She said nothing to Bruce on the subject, however, fearing that he might altogether forbid the drive if she did so.

Directly after luncheon, Moncrieffe and his daughters set off, accompanied by Sir Eldred, who had been unable to resist Harry's entreaties that he would be of their party; and, about an hour and a-half afterwards, Madame Vespri called for Constance, and the two went together to the Doria gardens, and spent a very pleasant afternoon.

As they were returning home through the town, they encountered Count Enrico, on foot, and madame stopped to speak to him.

"I was just going to call on your mother, count. Shall I find her at home?" she asked.

"I believe so," he replied. "I was on my way home myself."

"Then let me drive you," cried madame, ignoring the fact that the young man had had his back to the Palazzo Monelli when they met him.

He accepted the offer eagerly, and installed himself in the seat opposite Constance, with evident satisfaction.

She was less pleased than he was, however, and her vexation was great when she espied a faded white lily in his button-hole. It was exactly like one of those in the bouquet which she had had at the ball. She had worn a few of the surviving flowers at the opera last night, and could only conclude that she had dropped one, and that the count had picked it up. She thought it better to take no notice of the stolen lily, however, and treated the young man with a calm indifference which reduced him to despair.

She insisted on being dropped at her own house, which they passed on their way to Palazzo Monelli, and said that she would give herself the pleasure of calling on the count's mother another day.

It was later than she expected when she reached home; and, to her dismay, she found that Bruce and the girls had already returned from their walk. She had hoped to reach home before them, in which case she would have said nothing to Bruce about her drive. She had refused to make another driving appointment with her friend, but she thought it could do no good to tell Bruce about this drive. Now, however, concealment was impossible, and she went to her room to remove

her out-door things, with a sinking heart. She did not go near the drawing-room, where the others were assembled, but betook herself straight to her own room.

Apparently, however, Bruce had seen her drive up; for hardly had she gained her room, when he followed her, with an ominous look in his eyes.

"I wish to know, Constance, what you mean by disobeying me like this?" he demanded, angrily, as he shut the door, and strode towards her.

"Like what?" she asked proudly.

"Did I not forbid you to have anything more to say to Madame Vespri."

"No, certainly not."

"What do you mean by that? I distinctly forbid you to have anything more to say to her; and the very same day you go out driving with her secretly!"

"I had made my appointment to drive with Madame Vespri before you spoke to me about her. I shall never drive with her again, and to-day I refused to make another appointment with her. But it would have been rude and ungracious of me not to go with her to-day, after promising to do so. It would have looked strange too—as if you distrusted me, and I did not choose her to think that. You forbid me to *cultivate her much;* but you never forbid me to be civil to her. If you wish it, I will

drop her; but gradually—not as if she were a hot cinder."

Constance spoke coldly and proudly, for her husband's tone roused her indignation. He felt that she was better at arguing than he was, yet he was not pacified.

"Well, mind you obey me for the future," he said sternly. "*I* am not a husband whose commands are to be trifled with."

Then he marched out of the room before she had time to reply, and shut the door with unnecessary violence. He too had seen the lily in Count Enrico's button-hole.

When Constance returned to the drawing-room presently, Harry was pressing Sir Eldred to remain to dinner. No one seemed to think it strange that Harry should press him to remain; yet Constance dared not have invited any friend of *hers* to the house, without her husband's leave. She was glad, however, that Eldred should be here. He was always so nice—like oil on the troubled waters. He seemed to know that something was wrong to-night, and was particularly kind and attentive to Constance in an unobtrusive way which was felt by her, though hardly perceived by anyone else.

"So Count Enrico was driving with you to-day," said Julia innocently at dinner.

"Madame Vespri picked him up at the end of this street, that was all," replied Constance,

glad to have an opportunity of explaining things to Bruce.

But the latter took no notice of the communication. Constance's tone was explanatory, and why should she explain if there were nothing to conceal ?

Qui s'excuse, s'accuse.

CHAPTER XIV.

HARRY MAKES PEACE AND WAR.

THE winter passed away, and spring came in smiling, and still Bruce's manner to his wife remained the same—cold, chilling, severe. She had come to accept it almost philosophically by this time. She knew that she had done nothing to merit such treatment, and felt certain that, in time, her husband must come to his senses. She was too proud and indignant to argue with him in the meantime, but contented herself with avoiding his society as much as possible. She was completely shut up with her husband and his girls now, for all her other friendships had been nipped in the bud. She knew that people must think her husband absurdly jealous of her, and this was certainly a mortification to her. If it had been from excessive love that Bruce had been jealous, she could have forgiven him. But he did not love

her, and yet he was jealous of her. Indeed, she felt that, had he loved and understood her a little better, he could not have misjudged her so absurdly. One by one she had dropped all her friends, beyond bowing or speaking to them when she met them. Bruce hated parties, and she gave them up when she saw how unpleasant he was disposed to make himself. If Harry had been out, Moncrieffe would have gone about for her sake; but Constance saw that it bored him to go out only with *her*. So she stayed at home, thinking that there would be less to excite his jealousy here.

Fortunately, since Sir Eldred's advent, things had gone more smoothly between Constance and her step-daughters. Harry was in such high good-humour, that she could not find it in her heart to be cross with anyone. She had at last forgiven her father for the grievous wrong he had done her and Julia in marrying again; and this in itself was enough to make her happy, for she loved her father, and felt uneasy so long as she was on bad terms with him. She had begun to see that her step-mother was not inclined to be quite so interfering and aggressive as she had at first supposed, and with the exception of that one flare-out about Prince A—'s ball, nothing unpleasant had arisen between her and Constance since Sir Eldred's coming. He seemed like the good magician who could restore peace

where no one else could; and Constance was deeply grateful to him. Harry was rather aggravated sometimes when he refused to agree with her in blaming her step-mother for things; but gradually her own animosity against the latter abated, and the chief thing which now prevented her liking her was the remembrance of her own past ungraciousness towards her.

So the winter passed away, and it was now the beginning of April, and in a week the Moncrieffes were to return to London for the season.

During the past two months Moncrieffe had kept a jealous watch upon his wife, but had been unable to discern anything amiss in her conduct. She had grown colder, and more reserved in her manner to other men,—with the exception of Sir Eldred, who was one of the family,—and the most suspicious husband could hardly have found fault with her. Bruce began to think that perhaps he had been a fool. Julia might have been mistaken, and so might he.

It was in this frame of mind that he one day resolved to speak to Harry on the subject. At luncheon, something was said about a lady's having presented a rose to an admirer, and Constance had expressed her disapproval of her conduct.

"How funny of you to talk like that,"

said Julia sweetly. "Why, you gave Count Enrico a lily yourself."

"I beg your pardon," replied Constance icily, flushing crimson, yet looking the girl full in the face. "I never gave a flower to any gentleman in my life. I may have dropped a lily at the opera that night I went with Madame Vespri, and the count may have picked it up. But I do not know. Certainly it was not given to him by *me*."

There was no mistaking the sincerity of her eyes and voice, and Bruce felt compelled to believe her. He had thought a great deal about those lilies, and now he was considerably shocked to see how he had misjudged his wife. For a minute there was an uncomfortable silence, and then Constance added coldly,—

"I do not see what I have ever done to give *anyone* a right to suspect me of such conduct. I have tried to do my duty since I married, and I do not deserve to have such things thought of me."

Then she walked out of the room, as they had finished luncheon, and left the others feeling very uncomfortable. There could be no doubt that her last words had been intended for her husband more than Julia, and he coloured as he heard them.

"Leave the room, Julia," he said as Constance withdrew, "I want to speak to Harry."

Julia retired unwillingly, and Harry de-

manded whether she had done anything wrong "this time."

"No, no, my dear; I only want to ask you a few questions. I am sure *you* will tell me the truth at anyrate."

"Questions! What about?" asked Harry, in surprise.

"About Constance."

"Constance!" Harry opened her eyes and indulged in a low whistle. "What about her?" she asked.

"Do you—do you know where she got that bouquet she took to Prince A—'s ball?"

"From that flower shop at the corner of the street."

"You saw her buy it?"

"I saw her order it. You and Julia were on ahead as usual; and she and I behind. You didn't see her stop."

Moncrieffe sat thoughtful for a minute or two, and then Harry asked boldly,—

"Why, what did you suspect? Did you think some one had sent it to her?"

"No, no. But, Harry, Julia says that Constance used to flirt with Count Enrico—did you ever see anything of it?"

Moncrieffe reddened as he spoke. It went against his grain to come to Harry with such questions; yet he knew that it was only from her that he could learn the truth.

"Then Julia told a lie," remarked Harry

scornfully. "Yes she did, I tell you; and it's not the first I've found her out in either. I should as soon suspect the man in the moon of flirting as Constance."

"Julia has made a mistake."

"Not she! I tell you there was no room for a mistake. And so you've been jealous, have you? I suppose that's the reason you've been so cross lately.

"I've not been cross."

"Oh, haven't you! cross as two sticks. I wondered what was wrong between you and Constance; but I didn't think you could be such a goose. I'm sure I'd like Constance better if she *did* do something wrong sometimes. I never quite trust those perfect sort of people."

Then Harry left the room, and Moncrieffe acknowledged that he had been a fool. He would not allow that Julia had wilfully deceived him. It was quite true that he and she *had* seen Count Enrico in the florist's at the end of their street on the morning of the ball, and she had simply told him what she knew. The rest had been entirely the work of his own imagination, and he felt considerably ashamed of himself, as he remembered how harsh he had been to his wife during the past two months.

"Just fancy, papa is *jealous* of Constance," Harry confided to Sir Eldred, the first time

she found herself alone with him. "Did you ever hear anything so absurd?"

"Oh, all Rome knows he is jealous," responded the baronet, flushing. "It is a shame of your father to set people talking about his wife. He might trust her—she deserves it, I'm sure."

Harry made no reply to this, and looked doubtful; but she expressed her opinion pretty freely to Julia respecting *her* conduct.

"You're a little mean thing," she said, contemptuously. "You knew you were lying when you spoke to papa as you did."

"It's all very well for you to stand up for Constance," pouted Julia. "But she's a sly old thing. I'm sure it is all her doing that Edgar Day has not come here."

Harry had long ago ceased to regret Mr Day's non-appearance, and she said so.

"That doesn't excuse Constance for sending him off," insisted Julia. "She'll try and coax you into liking her, and then suddenly she'll turn round and do something behind your back. Wait till she comes between you and one of *your* lovers."

"You needn't count Edgar Day *yours*," scoffed Harry, as she left the room.

She was very kind to her step-mother during the next few days, in spite of Julia's warning, and Constance quite understood the state of the case. Julia had told Bruce lies about

her; and now Harry had told him the truth. This much she gathered from little things which the girls let drop, and from her own past suspicions. She was grateful to Harry for speaking up for her, but she felt the utmost contempt for the husband who could change his opinion of her character according as his girls spoke well or ill of her. He was very kind to her now—or at least he tried to be. But he was rather *gauche* where she was concerned, and hardly knew how to show her affection. She saw the change in him, however, but was astonished to find how little it affected her. She was glad he had come to his senses respecting her, for it was such a much more comfortable state of things; yet personally his sudden burst of kindness affected her very little.

Until the last two months he had always treated her kindly, if rather indifferently (and even lately he had never been absolutely unkind); but now it seemed as if mere kindness did not satisfy him. He bought handsome presents both for her and for her mother, and for once she felt that her wishes had more weight with him than his daughters'. Yet she felt quite unmoved by all this, for it was only to *atone* that he did these things. She felt far more grateful to Sir Eldred for his unvarying kindness to her, and the transformation which he seemed to have worked in

Harry. She was beginning to congratulate herself on having quite won the latter over to her side, and almost fancied that they would be firm friends for evermore. But, alas! she counted without her host.

It was only three days after Harry's interview with her father in the dining-room, that a letter came for Julia from young Bird, and Constance felt compelled to stop it. Had Bruce still been cold to her, she might not have had the courage to do so; but she knew he would support her now, so did what she supposed to be her duty by him. She stopped the letter, and refused to give it to Julia, unless the latter promised to show it to her father. As Julia had herself re-opened the correspondence with Archie Bird, she could not promise this, knowing that his letter was only in answer to one of hers.

"Very well," said Constance, speaking slowly to keep her voice steady, "then I must show it him, if you will not."

"It is very horrid of you!" said Julia, half crying.

"It is not your letter, and you have no right to keep it," cried Harry, standing up and confronting her step-mother boldly. "Give Julia her letter at once!" she added authoritatively, raising her head haughtily, and fixing her fine dark eyes resolutely on Constance's troubled face.

"Surely, Harry, *you* do not wish your father to be deceived," she said, reproachfully, yet shrinking involuntarily before the gaze of the angry girl.

"That is not the question," retorted Harry fiercely. "Whether Julia disobeys papa or not, *you* have no right to stop her letters. So now, give her this one at once, do you hear?"

"I should not be fulfilling my duty to your father if I did," said Constance firmly, though she was trembling in every limb, and had great difficulty in controlling her voice.

Harry was quite as tall and strong as herself, and she had a nervous feeling that in another minute the girl would attempt to snatch the letter from her by main force. But fortunately at this minute Sir Eldred appeared at the door of the drawing-room where this scene had taken place, and the angry dispute ceased as if by magic. Constance took advantage of this to leave the room, knowing that she could trust her husband's cousin to use all his influences with Harry in her behalf. But for once the baronet found himself powerless to stem the torrent of Miss Harry's wrath. It was odious of Constance to stop other people's letters! Harry stuck to that, and got quite angry with Sir Eldred for trying to defend her step-mother. It was very wrong of Julia to get letters from

Archie when papa had forbidden her, she agreed (though he would not have forbidden the correspondence if Constance had not made him); but two blacks did not make a white, and Constance was horrid too.

"She's only doing this out of spite—to pay Julia out for some nasty lies she told papa about her," she declared. "She says it is duty, but *I* know it's all *spite*. Papa would be the last person to approve of her stopping our letters, and she knows it."

Here the entrance of Moncrieffe himself reduced the young lady to silence, and prevented a serious quarrel taking place between her and Sir Eldred. For a minute Harry was silent, pondering how best to open the sore subject with her father, and Sir Eldred was about to depart in order to escape the "row," when Mrs Moncrieffe appeared at the door, carrying the disputed letter in her hand. Her entrance seemed to rouse Harry to instant action, and, turning to her father, she began, before Constance could speak,—

"Papa, has Constance any right to stop Julia's and my letters?"

"She would not do so," replied Moncrieffe.

"Would she not?" scoffed Harry angrily. "Well, she stopped one of Julia's this morning. Had she any right to do so?"

"That depends," hesitated Bruce, who felt certain that his wife must be in the right, and

his daughter, much as he loved her, in the wrong. He glanced inquiringly at Constance, and sighed, feeling how helpless he was to soothe the discordant female elements in his family.

"This letter came for Julia this morning," said Constance, flushing, but trying to speak calmly. "I saw it was from — India, and thought it right to show it to you, since she would not promise to do so herself."

"Of course you were right—quite right," said Moncrieffe decidedly. "But I do not see why Julia should wish to hide such a thing from me," he added, turning a look of pained reproach upon his youngest daughter.

"No, indeed," whispered Harry vehemently to Sir Eldred. "But it's just like Julia! Still, *I'd* never have told tales of her. Two blacks don't make a white, and Constance—"

"Hush! Harry," interposed Moncrieffe sharply; "don't whisper. This is your letter, Julia; read it," and he handed the letter to Julia, who received it with crimson cheeks and tearful eyes, and stood awkwardly with it in her hand, not knowing what to do with it.

For a minute there was a little pause, during which Sir Eldred made his exit quietly; only pausing to murmur a low "good-bye" to Constance as he passed her. She sighed as he went, for unconsciously

she had felt his presence a support, and somehow she felt more alone after he was gone.

"Well, Julia, do you not mean to read your letter?" asked Moncrieffe, as the girl still stood twisting the unfortunate missive round and round in her hands.

"I—I do not care to. I would rather burn it at once," she faltered, hoping by this means to prevent her father from reading it too.

"Is there anything in it which you are afraid of my seeing?" he asked gravely.

"I—do not know. How can I tell?"

"You have never written to young Bird since I forbade you?"

"No," replied Julia promptly, and then she trembled.

Supposing he insisted on seeing the letter after all?

"Then you may burn it," said Moncrieffe quietly. "The young man will hardly write again if you do not answer him."

With a thrill of relief Julia struck a light, and held the corner of the letter to it.

"I would have shown you the letter, of course, papa," she said, as the paper shrivelled up, "but Constance frightened me so. She spoke as if I had committed a murder, or done something very dreadful indeed. And, indeed, it was no fault of mine."

"I hope not," said Bruce gravely.

He would not allow even to himself that his daughter had told a lie; but he could not help thinking it strange that young Bird should suddenly take upon himself to write now, after remaining silent three months or more, unless Julia had done something to encourage him. He saw by the faces of Constance and Harry that they both suspected Julia of not speaking the exact truth; but he was unwilling to prove her wrong, and, indeed, thought that to trust children is often the best way of making them trustworthy.

"Only it would be as well to settle once for all how far Constance is to be allowed to pry into our correspondence," struck in Harry brusquely, just as the scene seemed drawing to a close.

"I will not have Constance spoken of in that tone, Harry," thundered Moncrieffe sternly. "So remember once for all. She will do as she thinks proper in everything. I have the fullest confidence in her. And now let us say no more about this."

Harry's face flushed crimson with outraged pride and anger as her father spoke. That he should take Constance's part openly against her, filled her with bitterest jealousy and pain; while her temper rose in arms at being thus openly reproved before her sister (who

was grinning maliciously at her discomfort) and step-mother.

"I could not have believed it possible, papa, that *you* would have tolerated such injustice. Why, the next thing will be that Constance will be opening our letters, and reading them," she cried hotly.

"You know perfectly well that you are not speaking the truth," replied Moncrieffe angrily. "This was quite an exceptional case, and Constance would have been very wrong if she had *not* told me that young Bird had written to Julia."

"Oh, if you are determined to take her part, of course it is no good my speaking," retorted Harry passionately. "But you are very unjust and cruel; and as for her, she's a deceitful cat, with her sweet—"

But here Moncrieffe sprang up from his chair, with a suppressed exclamation of wrath, and seizing Miss Harry by the shoulders, put her summarily out of the room and shut the door on her. Then he returned to his seat, and proceeded to read his paper in silence, while Constance and Julia sat silent too, and trembling as they watched him. He looked so very dreadful when he was in a passion.

And meantime Harry had flown to her own room, and was weeping hot tears of rage and mortification. At that minute she hated her step-mother as she had never hated any-

one in all her life before. She felt that it would be misery to live constantly in the house with her, and she wished passionately that she could marry and get away from her home. Everyone was against her, she reflected, with a morbid pleasure in making herself miserable. Papa, Julia, and even Sir Eldred. Yes, Eldred might be her friend in a way, but he could not see through Constance.

"He thinks it is unamiable of me not to be friendly with her; and he cannot see how horrid she really is," she sobbed to herself. "Oh, what shall I do if she takes him, my last friend, from me! Oh, I hate her! I hate her! Oh, I wish I could die!"

Julia would have said *she* instead of *I*, but the latter was more like Harry, and it sounded more tragic too.

CHAPTER XV.

THE KEEPSAKE.

WHEN Sir Eldred made his appearance at his cousin's house that evening, he found everything outwardly serene. Harry was still locked into her room (she had refused to leave it even for dinner), and the other three were apparently as good friends as ever. Julia was mindful that in two days it was her sixteenth birthday, and she remembered the pretty present which Constance had given to Harry on hers, and thought it her best policy to conciliate her just now. She begged her father and his wife's pardon prettily for having been rather cross just at first when her letter was stopped (there was a sting underlying her soft words too), and of course they were only too glad to make the peace with her, and constrasted her conduct very favourably with that of Harry.

So Julia sat in the drawing-room with her father's arm round her waist; and Harry lay on her bed, and sobbed an accompaniment to Constance and Sir Eldred's music, the sound of which half maddened her? How could he play when she was so miserable? And of course she laid this to Constance's account.

She had to come down next morning, but she would not speak to anyone, and, indeed, her father was too angry with her to take any notice of her. So she sat in miserable silence till Sir Eldred made his appearance; but even he could make nothing of her, and at last he was driven to take his departure somewhat hastily, since it became clear to him that everything he said to the angry girl only served to offend her further. For two days he did not go near the Moncrieffes, for he saw that if he did so he could not avoid "taking sides," and getting mixed up in the family feud; and there was no way in which he could be of any further aid to Mrs Moncrieffe just now. But on the third day, which was Julia's birthday, he went, hoping that by this time the storm would have blown over. It was very far from having done so in reality, but Harry received him more graciously than she had done last time. She was still angry with him for standing up for her step-mother, but she fancied that he must have been very unhappy these last two days, during which he

had been banished from her presence, and was disposed to forgive him if he would abstain from taking up the cudgels again in Constance's behalf.

When he came in, he found Julia still examining her birthday presents with placid satisfaction. Constance had given her a lovely fan, and she had accepted it in the most charming manner in the world. The sight of the fan reminded Harry of the ring which Constance had given her, and which she had never worn once. It had lain neglected in her trinket box since her birthday, but now she felt that she could not endure to have it there. Not only would she not wear it, but she would not keep it in her possession another day if she could help it, and she determined to take it in her pocket when she went out that day, and drop it somewhere when the others were not looking. Her sore feelings were not soothed by Sir Eldred's behaviour either. After speaking a few words to her, and seeing that she was still in the sulks, he turned away, and amused himself with his violin until they were ready to go out, when he walked beside Constance, leaving the two girls to follow together.

He had never wished to deceive Harry with regard to his sentiments. Hitherto he had found her a lively and amusing companion, and had felt that he had a certain

amount of influence with her, which he had used to keep the peace between her and her step-mother. His common sense had warned him that to take Mrs Moncrieffe's part too openly would be to destroy his power of assisting her with her step-daughter; but he had never wished to make Harry think that he took *her* part. On the contrary, his object had been to avoid taking parts at all, and he had always let Harry see that he hated to be told about her quarrels with her step-mothor. And now that she was cross and disagreeable, he did not see why he should martyrise himself by trying to talk to her. Surely he could not be accused of "taking sides" if he simply walked by Mrs Moncrieffe! But when outsiders put themselves in the way of family quarrels, they are generally dragged into them against their will. Constance understood quite well that Sir Eldred sympathised with her; and Harry was mightily offended with him for not allowing that her step-mother had behaved odiously. Neutrality had answered so far, but it would answer no further, and Sir Eldred felt this whenever he glanced at Harry's face. For himself, he did not mind offending her, but he knew that it would only make her hate Constance worse than ever, if he were to declare himself openly on the latter's side. What was he to do? Every step he took by Constance's side made things

worse for her with Harry, and there was a troubled look on her face, which showed that she herself was fully aware of this. But he was too proud and angry just now to alter his course one iota on Miss Harry's account. They had gone to several shops, and had finally driven to the Borghese Gardens, and still Sir Eldred stuck to Constance's side, protecting her, as it were, from her step-daughters.

"I think I shall leave Rome to-morrow," he said, suddenly, as they strolled slowly through the gardens, after driving for some-time, and finally dismissing their carriage.

"Leave Rome!" echoed Constance blankly.

"Yes; I have been thinking of it for some time. You are returning to England next week, and I do not care to stay here by myself."

"No, I suppose not," replied Constance vaguely. She was dreadfully disappointed at his sudden departure, and she showed this openly by her voice and manner.

This gratified the young man, while it made him feel doubly unwilling to go. If he could have been of any use to her, he thought, he would gladly have remained here for ever; but as things were, he could only increase the discord in the family if he remained.

"But we shall see you in town this spring, shall we not?" she asked, presently.

"I hope so. Yes, certainly you will."

"Ah! I am glad of that," she said, in a relieved tone, and smiling frankly at him.

For himself, he was rather tired of London seasons, and had cherished dreams of salmon rivers in Norway this year; but when Mrs Moncrieffe said she was looking forward to meeting him in hot, dusty London, his plans underwent an instantaneous change, and he began to think that "town" was not such a bad place after all. Just then he became aware that Julia was walking on the other side of her step-mother, and that Harry was hanging behind all by herself. She looked so very forlorn that Sir Eldred's good-nature bade him turn back and join her, for he was not afraid of trusting Constance to remain with Julia, the latter being in a good temper after the reception of her fan.

"Do you know I am going away to-morrow, Harry," he began, thinking this the safest topic of conversation.

"Are you?" asked Harry surprised, and regarding him with the air of a young tragedy queen. Why was he going? she wondered. Was it on account of her ill-humour with him?

"Yes, I'm off at last. I've been thinking of it a long time, but somehow I could never bring myself up to the scratch. Such an awful bore moving, you know. I don't see why a fellow should always have to keep

shunting about all over the world, you know. Why shouldn't people live and die in the place where they're born? It would save a lot of trouble."

"I don't think you'd like it," said Harry curtly. Why would he always speak as if he were joking? It often irritated her—it irritated her now; and yet she half liked it.

"Well, it might be inconvenient, certainly. Now if one happened to be born in a manger, you know. Yes, certainly, it might be disagreeable."

To this Harry vouchsafed no reply, and they walked on in silence for a minute. Then Sir Eldred ventured another remark; but was snubbed so unmercifully, that he wished devoutly he had left this difficult young lady to herself. But presently he saw her pull a ring out of her pocket with her pocket-handkerchief, and was glad of this opportunity to break the uncomfortable silence which had fallen upon them.

"Now, if *I* had been detected carrying rings loose in my pocket, people would have said, 'Just like you!' to me; but I never expected to catch *you* in such a charming piece of carelessness. Do you know you have raised me in my own estimation; I feel that I am no longer *the* most hopelessly careless person existing."

"Which means that I am," laughed Harry

contemptuously. She had forgotten all about the ring until this minute, and she wished that she could really have lost it without knowing—it would have been pleasanter. So she took it rather ungraciously from Sir Eldred, saying,—"I wish you had not seen it. I brought it out to lose it, and now I shall have to throw it away. Constance gave it me, and I cannot keep it," and so saying she flung it contemptuously on the grass at her feet.

Sir Eldred said nothing further, but he flushed all over his fair face, and bit his lip savagely. Constance had confided to him the little history of her birthday gift to Harry, and so he understood all about the ring.

"Poor, rejected gift," he muttered to himself, and as Constance and Julia, who had been speaking to some friends, here claimed Harry's attention, bidding her go and say 'good-bye' to the lady with whom they were talking, he stooped and picked up the little ring, which he deposited in his waistcoat pocket. But though he was not conscious of it, Harry saw his movement, and her cheeks flushed with pleasure, for it instantly occurred to her that the young man wished to keep the trinket in remembrance of herself—a sort of *gage d'amour.*

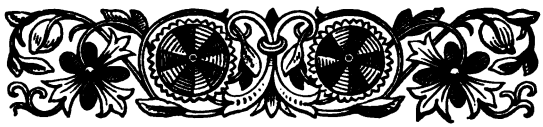
In a minute she had forgiven him freely for his apparent disposition to side with Constance. Evidently he was really fond of her (Harry),

poor fellow; and though it was certainly provoking of him not to see how badly Constance had behaved, yet that was Constance's fault, not his. She was so deceitful, and if she could blind papa's eyes, why not Eldred's. But the hard thing was to feel that she had contrived to make her (Harry's) conduct appear badly in Sir Eldred's eyes. She was so soft spoken and sly herself, and poor Harry was so open and impulsive; and evidently Eldred thought that the latter had behaved unamiably towards her step-mother. The tears mounted to Harry's eyes at this thought, and an intense feeling of self-pity filled her heart. What chance had she, a young, inexperienced girl, against a practised siren like Constance?

As they were leaving the gardens they met Bruce, and Sir Eldred informed him of his intended departure on the morrow. Bruce expressed considerable surprise at this sudden determination on his cousin's part, and cast an inquiring glance at Harry, who flushed brightly with pleasure and embarrassment. So even this wise father of hers saw that *she* was the cause of Sir Eldred's departure. Poor fellow, perhaps she had been unjustly cross with him; and yet he had certainly been provoking.

The baronet left them as soon as he had made his explanation to Moncrieffe, and they

proceeded homeward in pairs—Julia hanging on her father's arm in front, and Harry and Constance bringing up the rear. Somehow they always seemed to pair like this: Moncrieffe was so much happier with Julia than either of the others (especially now that Harry was under the ban of his displeasure), and she had no scruples about pushing herself between him and them. So Constance often found herself forced into unpleasant *tête-à-têtes* with Harry, but to-day she did not mind so much as usual. She was feeling cold and depressed, and could not have talked to her grave husband, had he been by her side; Harry's gloomy silence chimed in with her mood—though it can never be pleasant to feel that you are walking beside some one who is hating you wildly all the time—and as she walked mechanically along beside her step-daughter, she felt vividly how miserably uncongenial this new family of hers was to her. So long as there were outsiders (she did not specify the "outsiders" to herself) to break the family *tête-à-tête*, life was endurable; but just now Constance did not feel as if she *could* endure to remain shut up alone with her husband and his daughters. Thank goodness! they were going to London in a week's time!



CHAPTER XVI.

IN LONDON.

IT was a bright, glaring morning, towards the end of June, and Constance Moncrieffe was seated listlessly in her pretty boudoir in her house in Park Lane. She was quite alone, and was lying back in her easy-chair, with her eyes closed and her hands clasped loosely on her lap, for she had been up late the previous night, and was feeling tired and worn out both in body and mind.

It was now more than two months since the Moncrieffes had come to London, and since then they had been living in a perpetual whirl of gaiety and excitement. In a way this was a relief to Constance, as it took her away from her home, and enabled her to escape from the close companionship of her step-daughters and (though she would not add this even to herself) her husband;

but she was not very strong just now, and the wear and tear of London life was getting almost more than she could stand. Harry was young and energetic, and insisted on going everywhere, and Constance did not like to disappoint her. Besides, it would be hardly fair on Bruce, who had married her expressly that she might introduce his girls, if she struck work in the middle of Harry's first London season. Yet in her heart she was very sore that he did not insist on taking her away from London. He had asked her once or twice, whether she was not over exerting herself, and she had replied carelessly in the negative. If she had even hinted that she wished to leave town, she knew that he would have taken her, but she knew also that he would have done so regretfully, and that Harry would have been furious. On the whole she preferred the fatigue, to dragging the whole family away against their grain; yet she thought bitterly that her husband ought to have taken her away of his own accord.

Harry had had ten weeks of gaiety, and the season was no longer at its height; surely they might leave town now! But Harry had prayed earnestly to remain till the end of July; and her father had replied, hesitatingly,—"Well, if Constance does not mind remaining." At the same time he looked wistfully at his wife, hoping that she would not object.

Harry had attracted a good deal of attention when she was presented, and since then she had held her own successfully with the other London beauties, and her father was very much gratified by her success. True, she was as wilful and difficult to manage as ever, but the task of managing her now fell principally upon her step-mother.

There was very little domestic life just now in the Moncrieffe household, and Bruce did not see so much of his daughters' tempers and wilfulnesses as when they had been living quietly abroad. He did not accompany his wife and daughter to one-half of their *fêtes* and parties, for he was not fond of such things himself, and Constance was thankful to see that he now trusted her to go about alone. Yet she did not forget the lesson she had learned in Rome, and sacrificed a good deal of amusement rather than risk his jealousy again. Yet she liked to go out into society and try to forget that she had a home; Harry would never remain by her side once they were out, and she was left free to imagine that she had no disagreeable home worries—for a while. But they came back upon her all the more forcibly as soon as the passing diversion of the party was over. And so it was this morning when we first find her, after an interval of ten weeks, reposing alone in her boudoir.

She had been to a dinner-party and three

balls with the insatiable Harry last night, and naturally she is tired to-day. It is just one o'clock, and only an hour since she came downstairs, and still she feels tired, and as she leans back, with closed eyelids, she keeps wondering anxiously how she can contrive to make Harry see that she is foolish to flirt as she is doing with Captain Clifford. What can she say to convince the girl? she is wondering for the hundredth time, when there is a soft tap at the door, and the servant enters with a card on a salver, and says that the gentleman is waiting downstairs, will Mrs Moncrieffe see him?

Constance takes the card up languidly, but starts and flushes with pleasure as she reads the name printed on it,—

"Sir Eldred Glendower."

"Show him up, certainly," she said, quickly.

So he had come at last. After all, in spite of his promise to be in London this spring, he had gone off to Norway with a couple of friends to fish instead. For one thing, he found, on reaching England after leaving Rome, that his friends had arranged to go, counting on his sharing their expedition, and he had not liked to throw them over at the last minute, especially as he had been the originator of the excursion. So he had gone, and enjoyed himself very much; and Constance and Harry, though they had been

disappointed to miss him, had been too busy to waste many vain regrets upon him. Yet now that Constance found he was actually in town, and mounting her stairs, she felt almost childishly pleased and elated. She rose and stood expectant till he entered, and then advanced to meet him with her hand extended, and a sweet smile of welcome on her face.

"This is a pleasant surprise," she began brightly. "From what you said in your letter, I fancied we should see nothing of you this season."

He had written to her once an amusing, friendly letter, which she had shown to her husband and Harry, and then burnt.

"No, I did not hope to get off before the end of July; but one of our party lost his father and had to come home; and the other fellow was not a very keen fisherman, and had had about enough of it—we had been at it over two months, you know—and he was quite agreeable when I suggested accompanying our disconsolate friend home. I'm afraid I sha'n't be able to stay here long though, for there is a troublesome affair with one of my tenants down at Gwendale that requires my presence on the spot."

"I am sorry for that," said Constance simply. "Now you are here I hoped we were to see something of you."

"Oh, never fear; I'm the proverbial bad

penny. You'll see as much of me as you care to, before you've done with me," laughed the young man carelessly; and then bethinking him that he had not yet inquired after the rest of the family, he said abruptly,—

"And how are all the others?"

"Very well, thanks; the girls are out riding with their father."

"And you are all alone?"

"Yes; I am rather glad to be left quiet now and then, we seem always to be racketting about somewhere or another. A London season is rather hard work."

"It is. None of my friends know I am back yet, so I haven't begun to be pelted with invitations. I've only come to you—and of course I shall have to pay my respects to Mrs M'Mickie."

"Mrs M'Mickie?" repeated Constance bewildered.

"Yes; do you mean to say you don't know she's in town?"

"I don't even know who she is."

"Good Lord!" ejaculated Sir Eldred. "Then there is a charming surprise in store for you, let me tell you. You don't know who she is? Well, she's an ancient relative of mine and your step-daughters', with twelve thousand a-year to leave to whomsoever she pleases, and of course we are all preternaturally civil to her. Let me see, how does the relation-

ship stand?" continued Sir Eldred, stroking his blonde moustache meditatively. "My father was her brother; so I stand in the happy position of her nephew, and nearest relation. But then all her money came from her first husband, Mr Bland, who was uncle to Harry and Julia's mother, so that they are the nearest claimants to the money on his side. It was rather a shame of him to leave everything absolutely to his wife, I do think, but they say she insisted on his doing so, and when you have seen her you will understand that she is not a lady to be resisted with impunity. Now, however, she is always talking in a highly moral tone of the iniquity of leaving money away from the family to which it belongs; but then, on the other hand, I flatter myself she likes me, and she never could abide her husband's niece, Julia Bland. She hasn't seen Harry or Julia since they were children; so a great deal will depend upon the impression they make now. I suppose you think me mean to try and get their uncle's money," added the young fellow somewhat anxiously. "But you see I want it badly, and they don't. Besides if old Bland cared for his niece, he would have left her the money."

"Of course," said Constance readily. "I am sure you have quite as much right to it as the girls have. I suppose your aunt married

a second time, since her name is M'Mickie now?"

"Yes, she did; and she killed off her second beloved in six months' time. But how very extraordinary of Moncrieffe never to tell you anything about her," concluded Sir Eldred.

"I suppose he didn't think about it," said Constance flushing.

"Not think about it! Well, I suppose that must have been it, for he can't have kept it from you on purpose. And yet it was rum of him. Do you know the old lady lives close to you at Moncrieffe?"

"I thought you said she had never seen the girls, and they go there every summer."

"Oh, last year they had measles, and couldn't get down, and she went there just after they had left the year before. It's just eighteen months since she's been at Drum (the euphonious name of her farm); but how very odd of Moncrieffe not to mention her!"

Constance flushed again, and bit her lip, for how could she explain the cause of her husband's reticence to her visitor? It was only the old story over again; she was an outsider in her own family, and her husband did not care to tell her of anything that it did not immediately concern her to know.

"We are so busy in London, we have no time for telling family histories," she said, with a nervous attempt at a laugh. The young

baronet felt himself flushing with sympathy, for he quite understood what she must be feeling; but he saw that it would only hurt her to pursue the subject further, so responded lightly,—

"Yes, indeed, Miss Harry will keep you pretty busy. I hear she is a good deal admired."

"Yes; she is not so handsome—there are a great many better-looking girls in town; but she has such style; and that frank, *dégagé* manner of hers seems very much admired—by gentlemen."

"More by them than by ladies, I expect," laughed Sir Eldred. "I am afraid you find her rather difficult to manage, don't you?" he added, in the kind tone which always drew Constance's confidence out towards him.

"Yes, indeed," she sighed, despondingly. "I often think she would be much better without me."

"You mean that any attempt to restrain her on your part, only drives her on to fresh extravagances?'

"That is just it exactly; I am sure she would do a great deal better by herself."

"You must win her in the end; she is not bad at heart, and as she sees more of the world she will learn to appreciate your goodness."

"I don't know; I begin to feel hopeless

about her. Whenever I am proved in the right, and she in the wrong, of course it makes her hate me more."

"Hate you!" muttered the young man below his breath; but Constance heard him, and flushed slightly as she replied with a somewhat tremulous laugh,—

"Yes, hate me. You see you never had a step-mother, or perhaps you might have hated her too."

"Not if she had been like you," he replied, warmly; and then after a little pause he resumed, — "Still I like Harry better than Julia; at any rate she is honest."

"Yes, and after all she does not make—" but here Constance paused and blushed, for she had been about to say that Harry did not make so much real mischief as Julia, and she suddenly remembered that Sir Eldred would conclude that she meant mischief between herself and her husband. So she stopped abruptly, and then continued, hurriedly,— "You know poor Julia is set under a governess now?"

"Is she! I shouldn't think that would suit her at all."

"No, she cried and made a dreadful fuss about it; but of course her education isn't finished yet, and it would be quite impossible to leave her without some one to look after her while I am taking Harry about."

"And I suppose both the girls set it down as a piece of tyranny on the part of their cruel step-mother?" asked Sir Eldred, in a tone which Constance could not quite make out.

"Yes," she assented, wearily; "and the worst of it is that it really was I who first suggested the governess. When Harry taxed me with it I could not deny it. But Julia gets on very well with mademoiselle on the whole. She is kept pretty busy with masters and one thing and another; but she generally has time for her ride every morning. Still she hates having a governess to *look after* her —that is worse to her than the lessons."

"Have patience," said Sir Eldred, leaning his arms on his knees, and looking earnestly up at her (it was seldom anyone else had ever seen him look earnest). "Have patience, and things *must* come right in the end. It is not in human nature to go on hating you for ever; those girls *must* come to their senses soon."

"It seems as if they never would," said Constance hopelessly.

She was weak and tired, and the kind, sympathetic tone unnerved her for the minute. She raised her hand hastily to dash away the tears which sprang suddenly to her eyes, while her companion rose and moved away to the window, to give her time to compose herself.

"There are the others riding down the

street," he said, presently. "How very well Harry looks on horseback."

"Are they coming? Then perhaps we had better go down to the drawing-room and meet them," said Constance. "Harry will never be induced to set foot in this room, because it is considered especially mine."

"Little fool," remarked Sir Eldred impatiently, as he followed Constance from the room.

They went into the drawing-room, and soon Harry made her appearance, looking very bright and handsome after her ride. She always looked better in her habit than in any other costume, and just now her expression was bright and good-tempered. She cried out with surprise as she caught sight of Sir Eldred, and the colour in her cheeks deepened slightly as she advanced to meet him.

"So you have torn yourself away from Norway at last," she said, laughing.

"No, I am not energetic enough to tear myself away from anything—or place. It was my companions who carried me north, in pursuit of the sportive salmon; and it is they who have carried me back now. Such a comfort to have one's plans arranged for one, you know. Saves one all the bother of making up one's mind. Ah! there is our well-beloved cousin Julia coming upstairs. Now you will see the effusion with which we will greet each

other. There is an affinity of soul between your sister and myself, as you may frequently have perceived."

Here Julia entered the room, followed by her father, and her pale blue eyes grew a shade colder than usual as they rested on Sir Eldred. She extended him the tips of her fingers coldly, and he bowed over them with an air of mock devotion which made her long to box his ears, while Harry stood by laughing.

"Hullo! Glendower, have you dropped from the skies?" asked Moncrieffe.

"Exactly: I look seraphic, do I not?"

"I suppose Constance has asked you to stay and lunch with us?"

"She has omitted to do so as yet, but I shall be very happy to take her will for her deed," replied the baronet, with a bow.

Harry and Julia left the room to change their habits, and the other three remained talking, and presently Sir Eldred mentioned that Mrs M'Mickie was in town.

"Indeed?" said Moncrieffe, in surprise. "I had no idea of that."

"She's been here two or three days, but of course it would be below her dignity to apprise you of the fact. I think it was most disinterested of me to tell you, as she would have been mortally offended with you if you had not found out, and gone to see her,

and would instantly have made a will in my favour."

"I daresay she will do so anyhow," laughed Moncrieffe. "Constance, I don't know if I have ever mentioned Mrs M'Mickie to you—"

"No, you have not," said Constance coldly. "But Sir Eldred has just been telling me all about her."

"Ah! that is all right then," said Bruce placidly. "You had better take Harry to call on her when you go out this afternoon."

He had no idea that his wife could be hurt by his never having spoken to her about his daughter's rich aunt. Since his marriage he had almost forgotten Mrs M'Mickie's existence, and when he had thought of her, it had not occurred to him that it would interest Constance to hear about her. So now, when he heard that Sir Eldred had already told his wife about the old lady, he said "All right," with an easy conscience, and an utter absence of embarrassment which irritated Constance still further. Evidently, she thought he did not recognise her claim to be interested in his family affairs.

CHAPTER XVII.

AWAKENING DOUBTS.

HARRY did not make her appearance again till luncheon was half over; she had dressed herself for the garden party, to which she and her step-mother were going that afternoon, when she changed her habit, in order to "save trouble" as she said; and as she was often unpunctual, no one took any notice of her late entry into the dining-room. Sir Eldred remarked that she did not look half so well in ordinary dress as she did in her habit; her movements were too abrupt for grace, and she evidently found her short "tail" greatly in her way. But she looked quite the young lady now, and though in reality she was as impulsive and ignorant as ever, she appeared outwardly more "formed" than when Sir Eldred had seen her last. She dawdled through her meal leisurely, and on seeing

that the others had all finished theirs, begged them carelessly to leave her to finish by herself.

"I think it is time Julia and I went to our work," said mademoiselle, "if we have madame's permission to retire."

"Oh, certainly," said Constance, "and if we have to call on Mrs M'Mickie before going down to Richmond, I think I had better go and make my toilette now, as we shall have to start earlier than we intended."

"I have a letter to write in my den," then said Moncrieffe, rising too. "Glendower, what will you do? stay here, or—"

"Oh, I'll stay and take care of Harry—and to finish the cherries," added the young man *sotto voce*, as Moncrieffe left the room.

Harry laughed gaily, for she saw that her father thought his cousin would like to be left alone with her, and that he fancied his own company would be *de trop*. The two young people chatted and joked as gaily as if they had not last parted in anger; indeed Harry was thinking all the time about the ring which Sir Eldred had picked up in the Borghese Gardens, and wondering whether it was now reposing in his waistcoat pocket. When they betook themselves upstairs to the drawing-room it was still empty; and Sir Eldred, seating himself at the piano, proceeded

to play popular waltzes and tunes softly, while at the same time he carried on a lively conversation with Harry.

"Oh, there is that odious Mrs Greville come already!" cried Harry, who had been looking boldly out of the front window, careless of the fact that she was visible to the passers-by below.

"What! Mrs Moncrieffe's aunt?" asked Sir Eldred indifferently — not at all as if he minded having his *tête-à-tête* broken.

"Yes; she asked to go to this Richmond party with us, and of course Constance said yes, as she was her aunt. Really, we are being perfectly overrun by Constance's relations. Fancy, Sir Charles de Vere has offered Mrs de Vere a little house up on his place, only a couple of miles from Moncrieffe Castle, so we shall have all Constance's brothers and sisters making a second home of the castle, I suppose."

"It will be very pleasant for Mrs Moncrieffe to have her mother so near her," said Sir Eldred stiffly.

"Oh yes, and charming for us," added Harry sarcastically, just as the door was thrown open to admit Mrs Greville.

The little widow came rustling in, in a charming costume of heliotrope silk and cream lace, and would have embraced Harry, had that young lady not declined the proffered

salute, with more decision than politeness. Then, pretending to perceive Sir Eldred for the first time, she gave a little, semi-theatrical start of affected surprise.

"Why, Eldred, what a start you gave me! Dear me, it is fortunate it has not brought on one of those dreadful palpitations of the heart to which I am so subject. I thought you were away fishing in Norway, and all the time you have been in London, you bad boy, without coming to see me!"

"I only got back yesterday. I was coming to you this afternoon," drawled he.

"Ah! then I forgive you. I assure you, Eldred, I felt quite hurt for a minute to think that you had deserted me."

"Silly child," murmured the baronet, with a half-smile.

"How absurd you are," simpered the lady. "Why, I am old enough to be your mother."

"No; are you really? Then I must be, let me see—ten years old at the most. A fine grown infant, am I not?"

"Dear, dear, what nonsense you do talk, to be sure, Eldred. Why, I have always taken a sort of motherly interest in you, I am sure."

"Now, doesn't Mrs Greville look like my younger sister?" drawled the young man, appealing to Harry, who had been listening to this dialogue with profound contempt, mixed with indignation at the familiar tone

which Mrs Greville employed towards Sir Eldred.

"Not at all," replied the young lady promptly. "She looks much more like your mother, as she says—only there is no resemblance between you."

"Now, really, you have the strangest way of saying things, Miss Harry," cried the widow, colouring up, but trying to laugh off her vexation. "Many people would be very much offended—not by your reference to my age (which, by-the-bye, is only thirty-five), but by the *brusque* tone in which you spoke. But I make allowances for young people. I know that what appears like rudeness in them, is often simple *gaucherie*. Oh! you will learn in time, when you have seen a little more of society, my dear."

"What shall I learn?" asked the girl, flushing angrily. "To tell lies?"

"There you go again, my dear—it is really dreadful. It is lucky no one is here to hear you except Eldred and myself."

"Oh! don't drag me in," cried Sir Eldred, in accents of horror. "Of all the awful things, to be placed between two belligerent beauties! Oh! I think I shall run away. A fellow may be brave, but two to one isn't fair play, you know."

This checked the quarrel, which had seemed about to take place, and quite diverted the

little widow's attention from Harry. She carried on a laughing badinage with Sir Eldred for several minutes, and then tripped away to Constance's boudoir, to write a note which she had forgotten before leaving home, she said.

"Don't trouble to come with me," she said to Harry, who had made no attempt to do anything of the sort. "I know my way quite well, and your dear mamma won't mind my using a sheet of her paper, I'm sure," and the little lady betook herself to Mrs Moncrieffe's pretty boudoir, on the table of which lay a basket of flowers.

There were not very many of them, and evidently they had been ordered for some express purpose, but Mrs Greville turned them over coolly to see if there were any that would suit her dress. Yes, there was a lovely cluster of pinkish-white geraniums; arranged with some of that maiden hair they would look lovely; and Mrs Greville proceeded to pin them into her dress complacently. Natural flowers were *so* expensive, and it was not often she could indulge in any, save a few for her drawing-room.

Then she seated herself at the writing-table, and wrote not one note but three, explaining to her several friends how she came to be writing on her niece's notepaper. She also supplied herself with stamps, of

which there happened to be a new sheet lying on the table; and then she quietly placed several loose ones in her dainty little purse—for stamps and notepaper formed a heavy tax on her income, since never a day passed that she had not several notes to write, and she found it convenient to beg or borrow stamps whenever she could. As she was performing this last stroke of business, Mrs Moncrieffe's maid came in to carry off the flowers that were on the table, and Mrs Greville shut her purse, with a nervous snap, and deposited it hastily in her pocket again.

"What an abominable woman that is," Harry had cried, as Mrs Greville left the drawing-room.

"Poor little woman, she isn't bad at heart," laughed Sir Eldred. "But you know she is very sensitive about her age, and you could not expect her to be pleased with what you said."

"Oh! I don't mind what she said to me so much—I suppose it was natural for her to be vexed; but she is horrid altogether. The idea of calling you 'Eldred!' And then she is such a horrid sponge. I'm sure she came here early on purpose to get stamps and paper from Constance. The other day she borrowed a sovereign from Constance in a shop, saying she had forgotten her purse, and I'll be bound she doesn't mean to pay it back again."

"Well, you know she's not very well off, poor thing," said the good-natured baronet.

"Then she shouldn't live in a fashionable part of London, and entertain as she does. I'm sure, I hope all Constance's relations aren't like Mrs Greville, or we shall be eaten up. It will be just like a swarm of locusts."

But here the entrance of Constance herself saved Sir Eldred from the necessity of making a reply; but he guessed from the flush on her cheeks, that she had overheard part of Harry's speech, and his indignation against the latter nearly boiled over.

"I think I must be off," he said. "I was only waiting to say good-bye to you, Mrs Moncrieffe," and with a warm pressure of the hand to her, and a limp one to Harry, he took his departure.

"Is Mrs Greville here?" asked Constance, as she and her step-daughter were left alone.

"Yes, she went up to your boudoir to write a note," answered Harry, colouring. Then she added, defiantly, — "Were you listening to what I said before you came in?"

"No, Harry, I think you might know me better by this time, than to suspect me of listening at keyholes," replied Constance coldly. "But the door was ajar, and you spoke at the top of your voice—anyone could have heard you who happened to pass on the stairs. It is fortunate your father did not

do so, or he would have been very grieved to hear you speak so ungenerously."

The word "ungenerous" touched Harry, and made her look rather shame-faced for a minute; but then she said coldly,—

"I suppose you will not lose such a good opportunity of showing him what a wicked daughter he has."

"Do I ever tell tales, Harry?" said the step-mother reproachfully. "Think of all I have had to bear from you that your father knows nothing about. But let me relieve your mind on one point—neither my mother nor any of her children are *sponges*, so you need not be afraid of being eaten out of your luxurious home, and reduced to beggary by them."

Constance spoke the last words in a tone of cold sarcasm, and Harry stood silent, her cheeks flushed with shame, and her eyes downcast, realising for the first time how ungenerous and petty her words must have appeared both to Constance and Sir Eldred. She wished to apologise, but was too shy and proud to do so; while at the same time she could not forget that it *would* be a dreadful infliction to her to have her step-mother's family settled close to Moncrieffe Castle. So she stood silent, and in another minute her father entered the room and bid her be off to put on her hat, as the carriage was just coming up to the

door. Harry departed gladly, and Constance stood silent by the table, drawing on her gloves, with a little pucker on her usually smooth forehead.

"I met Glendower going out just now," began Moncrieffe presently; and Constance started at the sound of his voice, and uttered a mechanical—

"Did you?"

"Yes. He hasn't lost much time in finding us out, has he?"

"No."

"He and Harry seemed very pleased to be together again, didn't you think?"

"Oh yes," indifferently.

"Do you think there is anything between them?"

"Anything between them?" repeated Constance, looking quickly up.

"Yes; do you know I am sure there is. Why else should he come so constantly to the house? And in Rome too; he stayed on there much longer than he intended at first, and I thought at the time it must be for Harry's sake."

"I am sure he does not admire her, if you mean that," said Constance, with a bright flush of indignation and surprise. The idea of setting Eldred down as Harry's lover! Why, he was far too good for her.

"What makes you sure? I am sure he ad-

mires and likes her, and he is always hanging about her."

"He may like her in a way, but not in *that* way," said Constance decisively. "I am sure he does not, from his tone of speaking of her," she added, flushing, as she saw her husband looking earnestly at her.

"Well, women are generally supposed to be cleverer at these things than men," said Moncrieffe slowly, "but I still think I am right. Be sure you ask him to the house as often as you can; it is the thing of all others that I should like best for the girl. He is not rich, but they would get on so well; and with Harry's high spirit that is a great consideration."

It was the first time that Bruce had ever spoken with so much confidence to his wife; but just now she did not feel either pleased or grateful to him for doing so, and seeing that she was not inclined to pursue the subject further, he went downstairs, and left the house, feeling hurt and disappointed that she should take so little interest in his daughter's affairs; and yet perhaps it was natural, he told himself; Harry had repulsed all Constance's advances so uncompromisingly, that the latter might be excused for ceasing to take much interest in her, though she certainly tried to do her duty by her.

But it was not of her step-daughter that

Constance was thinking, as she stood listening to her husband's departing footsteps. She was flushed with indignation, and yet trembling with a vague fear, she scarcely knew what of. It was the intensity of her own feelings that really alarmed her.

Why should she mind if Sir Eldred *did* wish to marry Harry? But no; she scouted the idea with scorn. Harry, indeed! She was a handsome girl, no doubt; but that Sir Eldred should choose her for his wife was too preposterous. But why preposterous? and why should she (Constance) feel so sore and indignant at the mere idea of such a thing? She would not analyse her own feelings too closely; she knew that it was pain to her to contemplate the possibility of a marriage between Harry and Sir Eldred, but she shrank in fear from trying to make out why this was. She explained it to herself by saying that Sir Eldred had always been her own particular friend, and that naturally she felt hurt at the idea of his going over to the enemy. She would not call herself Harry's enemy, but Harry was certainly her's; and if Sir Eldred married the girl, he would be going over to the enemy; and of course Constance did not like that.

It was only natural she should feel as she did; anyone in her position would have felt the same. Sir Eldred had always been such a

true friend, that of course she valued him. Looking back, she felt certain that it had been for *her* sake he had prolonged his stay in Rome; and another flush of indignation passed over her as she remembered how Bruce had attributed this to Harry's fascinations. How kind and sympathetic he had always been, without making any troublesome display of his feelings! and how pleased and happy he had looked to see *her*—not Harry—again to-day! Yes, he was her very good friend, and good friends are things to be valued; and yet Constance had already made up her mind to do all in her power to discourage his friendship for the future. If Bruce were deceived by his cousin's constant coming to the house, might not Harry be so too? Constance felt certain that Sir Eldred had never given Harry any real right to misconstrue his conduct. But young, vain girls are apt to build upon insufficient foundations; and though Constance did not like the girl, she would have been sorry to see her made unhappy. Also, she felt strongly that it would be wiser for herself to discontinue this friendship. The very fact of a young wife's being unhappy in her own home, renders it peculiarly dangerous to seek for sympathy from a stranger, especially if he happens to be a young, handsome, and attractive man like Sir Eldred. The very fact that it cost her something to relinquish his friend-

ship, proved the necessity of doing so; and just yet Constance had not calculated all the difficulties of doing so. Rather she tried to push the whole affair out of her mind; there was danger in dwelling on it, she felt instinctively; and she was thankful when the entrance of Mrs Greville made a fresh demand on her attention.

END OF VOL. I.

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